Wild West Stories

And COMPLETE Novel MAGAZINE

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A WESTERN ROMANCE

Frontier Justice

By Col George B. Rodney

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Wild West Stories and COMPLETE Novel MAGAZINE

Edited by FREDERICK GARDENER

No. 120 JULY 1935

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The Mexican "Gato" thought he had his mice all set to eat only to find that the mice ate him.

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He was big and his voice was loud, but a yellow streak doesn't care about that—sometimes it pushes through, anyway.

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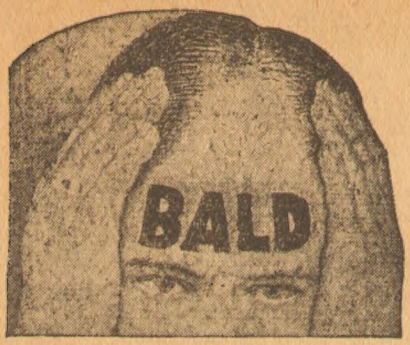

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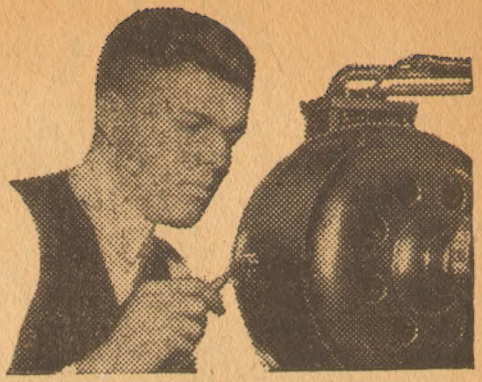

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30x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
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Stebbings for President

By Frederick Gardener, *Editor*

AS those of you who have been reading this magazine must know, "Coteau" Gene Stebbings has been foreman of The Round-Up for nigh on to ten years. In this period of time he has received and answered thousands and thousands of letters—letters asking for pen pals, letters requesting information of the West, guns and gunmen, letters praising "the old pie" and letters putting it on the griddle. But whatever the tone of the note, Gene has never failed to make the sender his friend.

Gene's homespun philosophy, his razor-edged wit, his songs and poems of the open range have endeared him to the magazine's many readers until, today, he has as many friends and well-wishers, not only in this land, but also in the far-away corners of the earth, as any man has a right to have.

All this affection and love has mellowed with the passing of years. So much so that Gene is now one of those rare persons whose close proximity is a necessity. When you are down Gene's gentleness buoys you up; when you are in a quandary his good sense casts the light of guidance upon you; when you are in need of a friend he is always there with a willing hand; and when you are joyful he is happy in your happiness.

As editor—sometimes they say "idiotor"—of the "old pie" I'd like to do something for Old Gene. Something to show my appreciation and gratitude, not only because he is my colleague but also because he is my friend—my *good* friend. And so the thought struck me, "Why not nominate him for President?" And so for the past few months, in the blurb under his department title on the Contents Page, I've been so boosting him—for the office of President.

Then last month (April) I playfully wrote: "Do I hear someone yell, 'Of what?'" That, my friends, is the place where, as they used to say in the movies, "Came the Storm". Gene wrote in part: "Yo' started th' Presidunt business, but I knowed all th' time *I oughter* be Presidunt. But iff'n yo' keep on blattin' "OF WOT" I'll ride down thar and smoke yo' up ontil yo're s' danged black they'll make yo' move to Africy—to th' wilds uf Africy, thet is."

And there, my friends, is where he has me. I know Gene means it; he sure will come a-smoking if something isn't done quickly—and, really, I have no desire to move to "Africy". What to do? What to do? Am I sorry I ever wrote that now-famous "of what?". But it is done, now, and the only thing to do is straighten the whole thing out.

This is where you readers come into the picture. You see when I wrote "Stebbings for President" I really didn't know what he'd be president of Now that he's called my bluff—really, can I show him a busted flush? So I'm appealing to you all; PLEASE send in some suggestions on "Of What Shall Gene Stebbings Be Nominated for President".

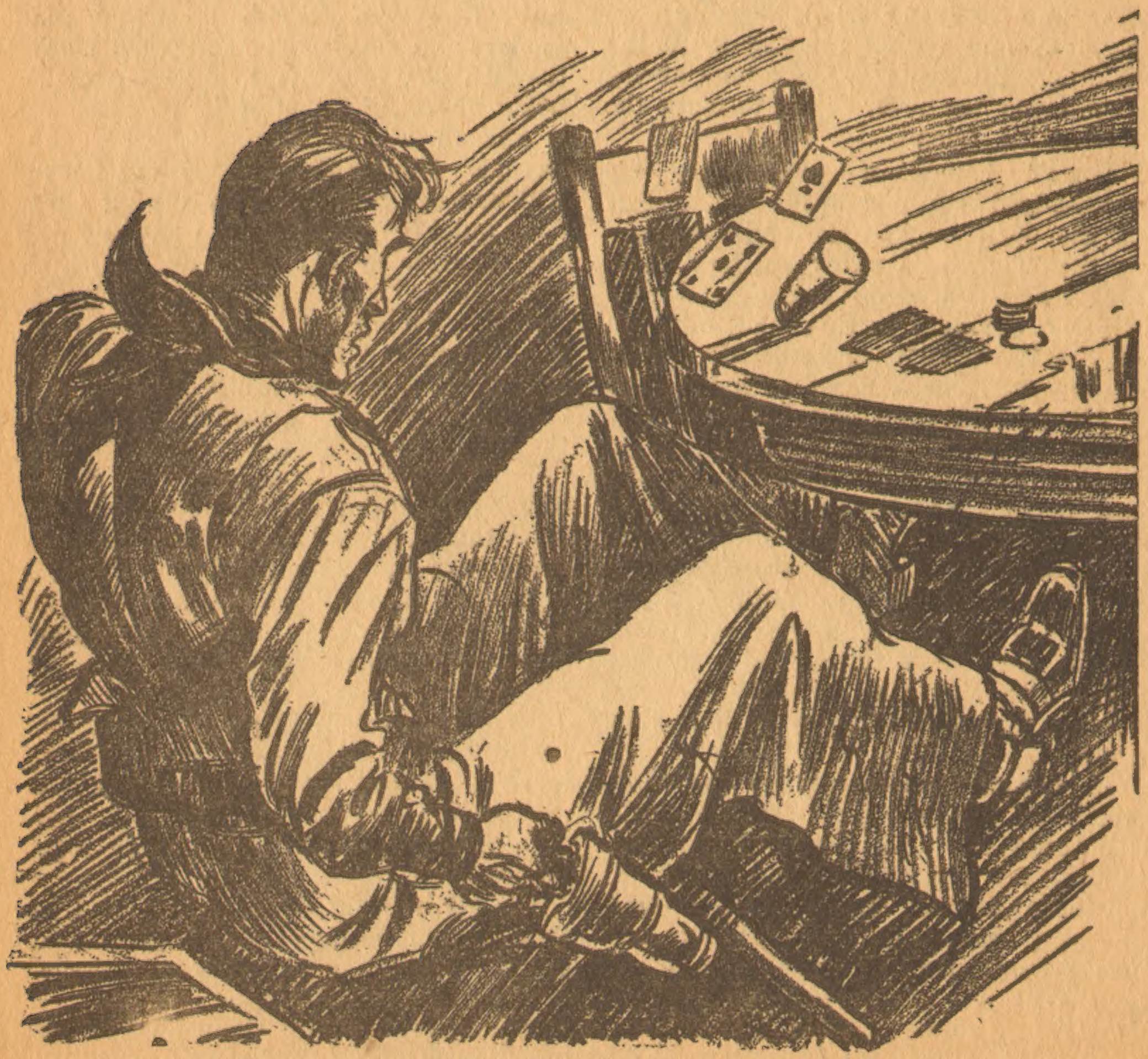
To the suggestion which most appeases Gene, I'll see that the originator receives a year's subscription to the "old pie" and Gene will send him or her an autographed photograph. (I hope he has one!)

It's all in fun, so don't be afraid to send in your ideas. The best suggestion will be printed in a forthcoming issue. Write them directly to me.

And here's hoping Gene doesn't get impatient and swoop down on me until I've had a chance to smooth things over.

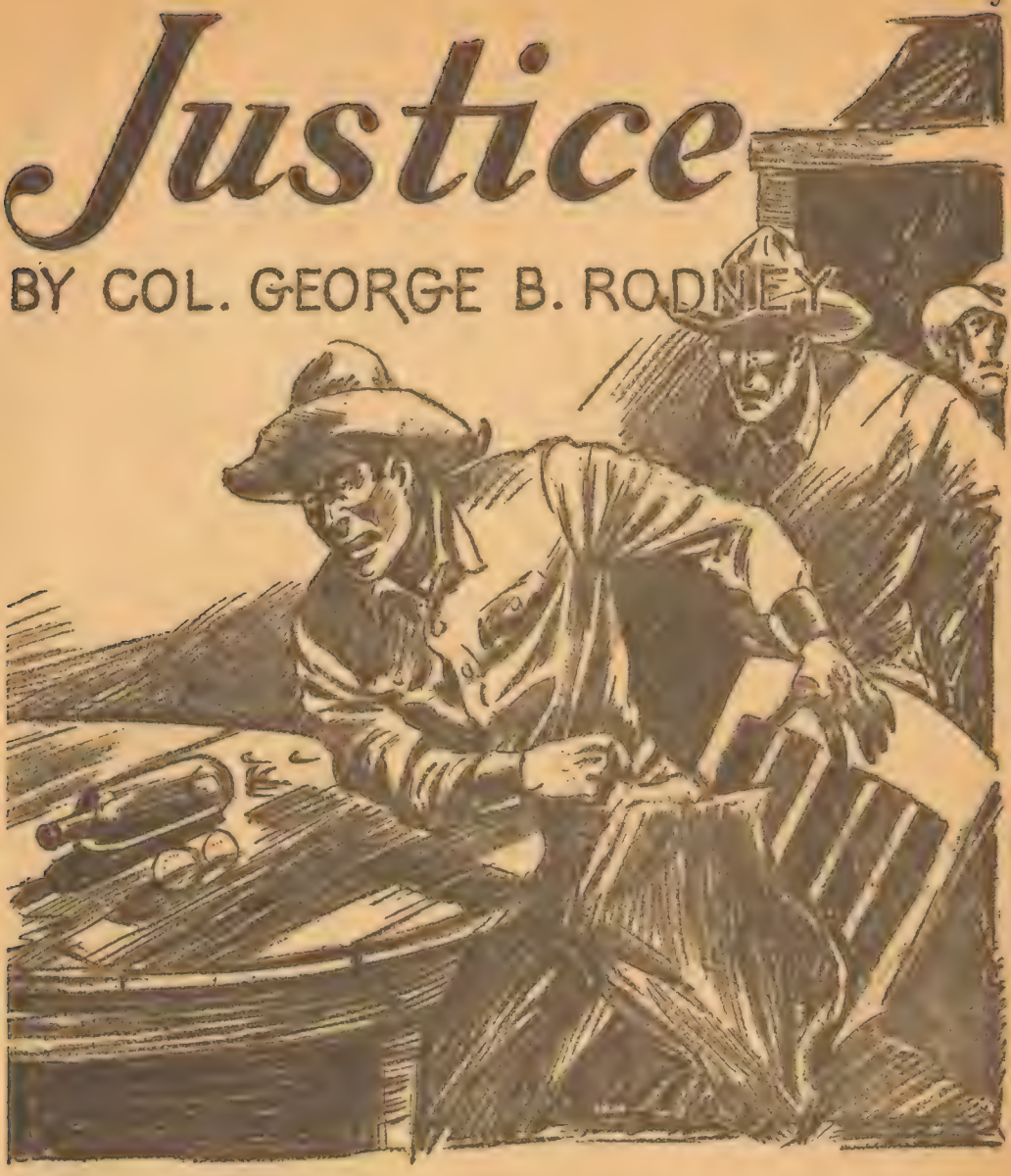
Frontier

Hemmed in by Bought Judges, Young Halston Resorts to Strategy and a Brace of "Sixes" to Win Back His Ranch—and a Girl



Justice

BY COL. GEORGE B. RODNEY



CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM BAJA

WHEN Brent Halston reached San Simon on Number Seven, east-bound, he went direct to the hotel. San Simon seemed new to him yet strangely old as the old hack creaked its way up the long street. Five years before, when he had just reached man's estate, an alluring offer had drawn him from his father's big ranch of Cincofuentes, Five Springs, to what old Sam Halston and Ben Livesey, his manager, thought to be the end of the world, Lower California, California Baja. They both resented Brent's eagerness to go. They could not remember when they themselves had broken trail and they thoroughly disapproved his going.

When Brent told his father of the offer, old Sam, as fine and straight a

cattle-man as ever crossed saddle between the Palouse and Llano Estacado, lost his temper completely as he had not done in years. To him to even contemplate leaving the Cincofuentes savored of disloyalty. When Brent told him he exploded:

"Me an' Ben Livesey have taught you all you know," he said hotly, "an' now, just when you're sheddin' your milk-teeth, you up an' leave us. You better remember, son, 'A rollin stone gathers no moss.' You'd better stay here if you take my advice. What for do you want to go a thousand miles to a strange country to ride herd over some stranger's cattle when right here you kin herd mine . . . an' yourn? Remember what I say, 'A rollin' stone gathers no moss.'"

"Huh. Look here, Dad. No man wants to wear moss on him. An' anyhow, 'A settin hen never grows fat.'"

That was so opposite that old Sam merely grunted.

Brent went. Certainly those five years spent at the Back of Beyond had not fattened him. He was long and lean and brown, where the tropical sun of California Baja had not burned him almost black, but his blue-gray eyes were as cool as steel and his mouth still had that curious little quirk at the left corner that deceived people who took it for mirth. When Brent was angry the corner of his mouth twitched. It was twitching a little as he got out of the hack at the hotel. He was not angry but he was disturbed. He had wired his father of his return and he could not understand why he had not been met at the station. Surely old Ben Livesey might have met him even if his father could not come. He strode into the hotel, dropped his bag by the desk and turned to the waiting clerk, who was a stranger to him.

"My name is Halston," said Brent. "Have you any messages for me?"

"One moment please sir." The clerk pawed over a mass of papers on the desk, selected a card and studied it. "A man from the Bar O ranch came in a while ago. He said that Mr. Livesey, manager of the Cincofuentes ranch, told him to leave word here for you that he will be in just as soon as he can make it. He sent word to have you wait here for him, that on no account are you to leave the hotel till he sees you. That's all sir."

"Thanks." Brent's face registered his surprise. He took the "makings" from his coat pocket and started a cigarette but the paper tore in his fingers. What could that message mean? It might be that in the five years of his absence his father's objections to his going had hardened into anger. But he could not believe that. A deep and abiding love existed between old Sam Halston and his son by the wife he still adored and Brent knew it. Something had happened and his taut nerves seemed to vibrate fear and suspicion. What could be the cause of that message? He had looked for warm greetings . . . Well! He could only wait. He signed for a room, saw his bag taken to it and strolled into the long bar-room where all of San Simon gathered in its off-hours.

The room was a welter of cow-puncher side-life. Men were there from the distant Bitter Root ranges where men rode herd-guard with rifles under the near leg and constantly watched the Mexican Line for marauders; men were there from the Hand o' God country and even from Sour-water where, Brent had heard, there were some men so lost to all sense of decency that they had gone over from cattle to . . . sheep. He could scarcely credit that. Sheep! *Sheep!* The very name is anathema to cattle-men; the

noisy, woolly, blatting, stupid, stinking beasts that eat out the very heart of the grass lands; that infect the ground itself with foot-rot and scab and stink up every waterhole so that cattle will die of thirst rather than drink there.

HE bought a drink and stood slowly drinking it as he glanced about the place. Five years before he had been too young to have had more than a hear-say knowledge of the place but it seemed little different from the room that he remembered. Two roulette tables on the long side of the room were crowded, running wide-open with checks and gold in little heaps and a wheel that clicked like castanets. Chuck-a-luck too and faro held their own. At the rear of the room a game of Chinese policy was running full-blast and in a niche in the end of the room five men sat at poker. That game had lasted for three days though Brent did not know it. Men came and went but the game endured. Bates was there from Red Water and Ewing of the X. P.; big ranchers who would not drop out while a merchant could be found who would cash their checks after closing hours. "Pop" James was there too, red-eyed and white-bearded, whining over his winning more than he would have whined over his losses, snapping like a trapped coyote as he told his troubles to a grinning world.

"Hell!" he whined: "Winnin's worse 'n losin' when you come down to cases. If I'd done lost that last game yestiddy, I'd only have lost a thousand dollars but damn it all, I won. What 'd I win? Damn it all! I won a flock of sheep an' all the furniture outen a bawdy house. The hell of it is that nobody would buy the sheep!"

Brent was aware of a ripple of laughter that swept the room but his eyes were on the game, where a big black-bearded man faced a slim, tanned youngster of about Brent's own age.

"That bird 'd better be keerful how he bucks Opp," a voice muttered in Brent's ear. "I'd ha' told him if I'd knowed he was aimin' to mix it up wi' Opp. He plays poker to win. Fair if he kin but win anyhow. Watch 'em, will you. . . ."

The two men sat facing each other. The others had dropped out of the game temporarily and waited to see what would happen. The stranger sat slim and silent but shifty-eyed. His hands were the delicate fingered hands of a born gambler and his face was inscrutable. Across from him sat Opp, known through three counties as dangerous, dark, heavy-set, with the yellow eyes of a cougar; eyes that fastened balefully on his opponent and that watched him with an unwinking stare that made the watchers shiver a little in vague discomfort. Opp had just been elected sheriff and was to take over his duties next day. All the Valley knew Opp and most men feared him. In fact, Opp was a dangerous man and even in his election did not lack careful traducers. All men knew that that election had been as honestly bought as any article of merchandise in Goden's Emporium but they did not discuss it. A sudden flurry at that card-table set men to milling so that Brent, standing out-side the circle, caught only a casual glance of what happened. A sharp word rang out; then Opp half rose from his seat. The next moment the stranger sprang erect and dashed the cards full in his opponent's face.

"Marked cards!" he shouted. "You damned cheat . . . Take that. . . ."

THE heavy smash of his fist on Opp's mouth sent the big man staggering into his chair. His weight

smashed it and it collapsed under him as a dozen men scurried for cover. They knew Opp and they knew exactly what to expect but it came so quickly that they had no time to take steps. Opp fell on his back among the ruin of his chair, caught himself on his left hand and the quick bark of his heavy six-gun spat a jet of sparks from under the table. The stranger suddenly staggered side-wise and fell across a huge brass cuspidor and sprawled at full length on the coco-fibre matting while the gray powder smoke swirled up through the bracket of the swinging lamp.

Brent whirled from the end of the bar as Opp rose, jammed his gun into his holster and started unopposed for the door. He had no cause for worry over that killing and he knew it. Every man about that card-table had heard the words, had seen the cards flung into his face. In any bar, in any game from the Mogollones to the Cascades, Opp would have been held blameless but for one thing. Brent saw it though the others missed it. Perhaps they saw it but dared not remind Opp. Brent noted the conspicuous absence of belt and holster from the wounded man and spoke before he thought.

"The damned murderin' cur!" His words carried like a rifle-shot. There was a tang and a timbre to them that made men turn and eye him. They openly feared Opp. "The man was unarmed! Any wild hog can charge a bee's nest!"

They drew back as from a small-pox sign. They were for the most part quiet ranchers intent on one drink before starting for home and they deprecated a row. Opp turned sharply on him and caromed into him but Brent did not give an inch. He returned stare for stare from the yellow shifting eyes. Opp was a killer with a killer's reputation to sustain. If one man in San Simon was allowed to question him a hundred might. And Brent's words cut the hush like a knife. Opp's shoulders rounded, his chin thrust aggressively forward and his yellow eyes bored into Brent's.

"Was you referrin' to me?" he demanded.

There was no possibility of a mistake. Brent realized that he had given the man the only excuse that a killer needs and that trouble was on him. Like a flash he acted.

His heavily-booted right foot shot out and hooked about Opp's leg below the knee. Then he pulled. As Opp staggered under the strain Brent's fist lashed out with the full weight of his body behind it. His fist caught Opp in the soft tissues under the left ear and his big body went down with a crash as Brent snatched his six-gun from its open holster and flung it behind the bar where it crashed among the bottles. Then he turned to face the astonished crowd that drew back as poplars strain back in a high wind.

"If this fool's got a friend here that friend 'd better take care of him. When he comes-to, tell him that if he ever raises hand to me again without cause, I'll kill him as I'd kill a mad-dog. Is there a doctor here?"

The crowd parted as a man thrust forward from the group about a roulette wheel.

"I'm a doctor, the only one in San Simon just now. My name's Nevins. Give me a look at him." He made a swift examination and rose wiping his palms on his trousers. "He's badly hurt. Mortally I fear. Some of you get a litter! No!" as a man reached for the card-table. "That's too short. Jerk a door off its hinges and get him over to my office at once. He needs

attention that I can't give him here."

A man tore a screen door from its hinges and two helpers laid the limp body on it and they carried it swayingly across the street to Nevin's office. Nevins and Brent were half-way through the doorway when a heavy hand stopped Brent at the steps.

"Good Lord," a voice said sharply: "You ain't been back in God's country two hours and you're already mixed up with a killin' bee. How come, Son?"

"Ben! Ben Livesey!" Brent's heart gave a great leap as he recognized old Ben Livesey, the fore-man of Cincofuentes ranch, his father's place! Ben Livesey, the toughest, hardest-riding, straightest-shooting fore-man that the Land of Little Water ever knew. Ben Livesey who had taught him the three virtues of the ancient Persians; to ride, to shoot, to tell the truth. "Ben," he said with a little catch in his voice: "I was waitin' for you. What did your message mean? Where's Dad and how is he?"

"Wait a bit," said Ben shrewdly: "Are you mixed up with this killin'?" He jerked his head at the open door through which they could see Nevins bending over an operating table on which his patient was stretched. Brent had just time to utter an indignant denial when Nevins spoke.

"Your testimony may be needed in this case to clear Opp," he said. "Of course, if what I heard is correct, the man is unarmed but he must have given ample provocation to Opp, and Opp is our new Sheriff, you know. Of course it is a fact that the man was unarmed. What is your name, please?"

"Halston! Brent Halston," said Brent coolly. It was fairly plain that this doctor was espousing the cause of Opp. "I suppose I may say I live here. How about it, Ben?"

"I'll be damned if I know," said Livesey sharply. Nevin's eyes narrowed and he glanced sharply at Livesey but the old man's eyes were on Brent.

"If that man Opp gets away with this then there's no more justice in San Simon," growled Brent. "I'll make out my affidavit so it can be used in case I am gone when the case comes to trial. It's a perfectly plain case. The man was sittin' in a poker game with some other men and the man Opp. He accused Opp of cheatin' and threw his cards in Opp's face. Opp was cheatin', too. I saw the ends of a card bent over. Then Opp shot him. It was cold-blooded murder, if you want to know. The man was not armed. Who is he?"

NEVINS, who had already gone through the pockets of the wounded man, shook his head. The man was unconscious and the few articles that Nevins took from the pockets and had piled on a table gave no tangible evidence.

"You can see what he had in his pockets," he said. "Tobacco, pocket-knife, papers for cigarettes and a key-ring. That's all. Did the fool think he wore the armor of Achilles to brave Opp like that in public? Apparently there is nothing that will aid in identifying him. . . ."

"Unless that'll help." Brent pointed to the man's right arm that had slipped from its position crossed on his chest and hung over the edge of the table. The shirt-sleeve had been cut away and the arm showed as white as a woman's in the yellow lamp-light; so white that the tattoed figure of a girl's head done in red-and-blue inks stood out as clear-cut as a cameo. Above the head was printed a name "Elena" and below it the word "OHIO". The

other bore the words: "J. W. U. S. S. Daphne". That was all.

"That may be a clue of some sort but I'll be damned if I see how it can help much. There must be a million girls named Elena back in Ohio," grunted Nevins.

Brent glanced queerly at him but said nothing; then Livesey pulled at his arm.

"Come on Brent. We've got to be goin'. Night, Doc." And he headed back for the hotel with Brent at his side.

CHAPTER II

THE PLOT FOR WATER

"I CAME near forgettin' you'd just come back after five years. I like to spilled the beans. You got a room in this damned den o' thieves?" Livesey halted Brent on the hotel porch. "If you've taken a room, take me to it. Get a bottle o' hooch on the way. I need it for what's comin' So will you."

Brent started to speak, but stopped mid-way. He knew old Ben well, and he knew that wild horses could not draw him to talk unless he chose. He ordered a bottle of whiskey from the bar, saw glasses and water started for the room, and showed Ben into the room that the bell-boy opened for them. When the door was closed and the bottle opened, Brent spoke.

"What does all this mean, Ben?" He filled a glass almost brimful and toyed with it till Livesey took it from him and set it on the bureau.

"Let that alone till I'm through talkin'," he said. "That damned Doctor can't be trusted any further 'n you kin sling a two-year-old bull by the tail. He knows too much as it is."

"That murdered man," said Brent, grimly, "was unarmed, just as I said. That man Opp committed cold-blooded murder."

"That didn't surprise no one," quoth Livesey. "You listen to me, Brent Halston! A hell of a lot of water's run under the bridges since you went a-wanderin'. I sent that message to you to head you off before you c'd make a damned fool o' yourself."

"Look here, Ben" — Brent almost thrust the old man aside—"I can't figure out what you're after. I came back here to go home; see Dad . . . and you . . . To get back to my old home on Cincofuentes, not to take part in any bar-room scrap with a half-breed murderer like that man Opp. Even if it's true, as I heard tonight, that he's just been elected Sheriff. I don't believe that. Jim Garwood was sheriff when I left. The County must have gone loco to elect a man like Opp after Jim Garwood!"

"Most o' the County *is* damned *loco*," said Livesey imperturbably. "You an' me 've got to have a war-council, Brent." He peeled off his coat and flung it on the bed and stood up to his full height, a fine figure of a man with his hawk-like face under his iron-gray hair. But his face was grave and perturbed as he faced the boy he loved.

"Opp was elected sheriff all right," he said tersely. "Now you listen to me! You're in as big a mess o' trouble as any steer bogged down in Blue-water. An' I never seen the bottom o' Blue-water yit," he said. "I wrote you four, five letters to your address at Santa Luisa in California Baja. Why in hell didn't you answer 'em?"

"Because I never got 'em," said Brent warmly. "The rancho was two hundred miles from Santa Luisa and the people were on the middle of a revolution, too. I went down to Cali-

fornia Baja against your advice and Dad's. When I'd been there a year with no word from either of you I figgered that you were layin' off your pens till I got tired an' hollered 'Quits.' Sort of leavin' me to stew in my own juice, so to speak, an' come home squawkin' for a hand-out."

"Uh-huh," Livesey nodded grimly. "That's exactly what I said you'd figure. Go on, Son!"

"There isn't much to tell," said Brent. "I took my job and I stayed with the outfit till a lot of others had quit and I was made foreman. Then the manager died, and I was the only man on the job who'd been with the outfit long enough to know the details, so they made me manager. Last year the ranch sold out to a big British syndicate and most of the Americans were fired. I had a five-year contract as manager, so they couldn't fire me, but . . . well, Ben, I reckon I got a bit homesick. I threw up the job and came home. They gave me a bonus when I left; I cashed in for two extra years' pay in advance. I wanted to come home."

"Have you got any money?" queried Livesey bluntly. "You may need it."

"Plenty, for me. I've got about eight thousand dollars. Now you talk, Ben. What does all this mean? You say I'm in trouble. What sort of trouble? Where's Dad, and how is he?"

"He's well—mentally, morally and physically well—but he's sure in one hell of a fix! Worse 'n the rest of us are."

"What in hell is all this mystery?" demanded Brent hotly. "Where is Dad? Why didn't he come to meet me? Is he out at Cincofuentes?"

"No. He ain't, an' that's a fact . . ." Livesey rose and stood between Brent and the door. "Brent . . . Son . . . Listen to me . . . ! An' keep your hand away from your holster! God! He knows it hurts me worse'n a festerin' spur-cut to tell you! But . . . Your father's locked up in an insane asylum!"

"He's . . . ? What . . . ?"

THE whole world seemed to crash suddenly about Brent's ears. The lights in the room flickered in shimmering lines of red and orange and catherine wheels seemed to be breaking inside his head. Then blackness came—a blackness that seemed to be all-embracing, through which he heard old Ben Livesey speaking. His voice seemed to last for eons and eons, and to which he could hold. That darkness seemed to last for aeons of ages, and through it he heard old Ben's voice—soft, cajoling, caressing—as he had often heard it with fractious colts, when he was coaxing them to the breaking corral.

"Do you mean to tell me that Dad has lost his mind?" Brent heard his own voice asking the utterly absurd question. The answer came—sudden, sharp, decisive.

"No. I don't mean any such damned fool thing!"

Brent sat down, rose suddenly and reached for that bottle, but Ben thrust him back with a heavy hand. Then he filled a glass and handed it to Brent.

"I reckon it'll act as medicine now! An' God, He knows I think you need it. I know I do."

Ben drank and stood over Brent till he, too, had drained his glass.

"I don't mean no such thing. Old Sam's as sane and sound as you or me, but he's been locked up because he was declared insane by some of the damnedest liars on the face of God's earth . . . ! Wait! Let me start at the beginnin'."

"For God's sake do!" Brent poured himself another steadying drink. This that he had heard was worse to him than his father's death notice would have been, for men who can calmly face death, tremble at the thought of insanity—that worse than death in life!

Though old Ben Livesey had perhaps never heard of Socrates, he proceeded to impart his news by Socratic methods —i. e., by asking questions:

"D' you remember one Gilbert Ware?" he asked. "Him who come to your Dad a dozen times tryin' to git him to sell or lease the water-rights to Five Springs?"

"Of course I remember him. I remember that every one said he made a fortune off crooked roulette tables. Started up in Montana and wound up in Texas with a string of crooked tables across the country."

"That's right." Livesey nodded. "But he made a big fortune offen them tables and he put his money where it'd do him most good. When you went away, Brent, the whole county an' five other counties too was all cattle lands. Little water . . . That's why they called the land the Land o' Little Water . . . Then that damned grafter Gilbert Ware came in with his stinking sheep. He had reason, too, on'y we couldn't see it. Sheep 'll live where cattle die. That's his main hold. When cattle dropped to seven an' seven-fifty, no man could make a dollar. That's where Ware came in with his sheep. He brung in nesters and squatters. Each man took up a homestead-right and filed on his land."

"They couldn't have qualified," said Brent, who knew something of the operation of the homestead laws.

"A few of 'em only got titles to their land and Ware bought 'em out. The result was that the free range was broken up and a hundred wire fences grew almost over-night."

"They had a legal right to do that," said Brent. No one better than he knew the rules of the game that were old when Jacob tended Laban's flocks and herds.

"O' course they had a right. But I mind a story I heard once. It was about a man what lent another a hundred dollars. If he couldn't pay it back he was to give a pound of his meat. Time came when he had to pay an' he didn't have the money. Kind of a damned fool thing, if you ask me . . . ! They called the man Shylock . . . ! He demanded his pound o' flesh and they said he was entitled to it, but if in takin' the meat he shed one drop o' blood he was a goner."

"I know." Brent chuckled at this version of "The Merchant of Venice." "You're right. If Shylock shed one drop of blood he was, as you say, a goner."

"Yeah. Well . . . ! Them li'l fellers cut up the free range with their wire fences. Then they couldn't raise any crops without water, an' they had no water, so Ware bought them out. Then Ware himself done some plain an' fancy buyin'."

"Land?"

"Nah. Ware ain't that kind of a fool. He bought up men. They was cheaper 'n land at that. He bought up Cecil Lammert, the County Judge, by gettin' hold of a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage on Lammert's house. Lammert's still got nine years to serve as judge. Then he bought up that man Opp. Hell, boy! Everybody knows it was Ware's money that kep' Opp out of jail an' got him elected sheriff o' the County. Ware owns the County Attorney an' the County Attorney is brother-in-law of Ed Lippitt, the County Treasurer. I'm tellin' you this so

you'll see exactly where we stand when it comes to a legal fight. We simply ain't got a look-in. Gil Ware is as sharp as they make 'em and he's always on the right side of the legal fences. If he ain't . . . Hell! Old Lammert shifts the fences. Ware's put all his money in sheep, and he just about owns the county."

"HOW about the cattle ranches?" asked Brent. He knew most of those men—big, reserved men, who lived on their isolated ranches, intent on their own business. "Surely Ewing and Williams; Peters and James, and Big Phil Reed were not men to take this lyin' down."

"They 'tended to their own business so damned well," quoth Ben, "that when they come to, they had no business to 'tend to. Now you know a li'l bit about Ware. Shall I go on?" Brent nodded in silence. Mr. Livesey swept on. "What makes our ranch of Cincofuentes the most valuable land in the valley?" he asked.

"Why? Cincofuentes itself, the Five Springs," said Brent. "Everybody knows the ranch is named from the Springs."

"Right. How big is the ranch?"

"It used to graze fifty thousand head an it's most of it ten-acre land."

"If we had the cattle," said Ben. "We ain't got 'em, and somebody's takin' damned good care we don't git 'em. You mind that old 'Nester' Fuller? Him that took up a homestead place just below Five Springs? You must remember him. Your Dad tried to buy him out time and again."

"Of course I remember him. Why?"

"That summer when you left for California Baja was a mighty dry spell. Fuller's crops all failed and he sold his claim to a man named Wilton. Your Dad was away just then or he'd sure have bought Fuller's site. Wilton got it, and him an' his son live there now."

"Oh, damn it, Ben! Get down to hard facts, will you?"

"Name o' God, boy. It took five years fer all this to happen, and you look fer me to tell it in two minutes? That ain't reasonable. The same time Wilton moved in on the Fuller homestead, he brung suit in court against your Dad. He claimed that Five Springs belonged on the Free Range an' that we had no right to keep his sheep offen the water. You see, them damned Wiltons run sheep."

Brent drew his breath hard and stared at the old foreman. He knew exactly what those words meant. It meant that if sheep were grazed on the Free Range south of the line of the Catarata Mountains, that sooner or later every acre of grass-land would be tainted and stripped of grass and verdure. It meant that cattle would neither eat nor graze there. It meant sooner or later . . . . war to the knife!

"You know what that means? All right. Then one night one of the Wiltons stole a brand new tarp offen us that we'd bought to cover our hay piles. We found it under Wilton's barn floor with our name an' marks still wet with the black paint. Wilton swore he found it on the trail an' just hadn't got round to returnin' it. Your Dad warned them then. A week later we—him an' me—caught both the Wiltons chunkin' our cattle outen our own water at Five Springs to let his damned sheep in on it. No cattleman could have blamed old Sam if he'd cracked down on Wilton fer that, but he didn't. He just dropped a gun on Wilton while he talked to him. He told him that if he or hisn ever put hair er hide er fleece on Cincofuentes land he'd go to killin'. Wilton went right

to town an' swore out a warrant"

BRENT drew a breath of relief. "That's not new," he said. "He's been bound over to keep the peace before."

"Them Wiltons didn't stop at that," said Ben gloomily. "They seen a smart lawyer over in Tucson, one of Ware's men. They swore old Sam was crazy; that he'd threatened their lives an' that he was a dangerous lunatic and a menace to law-abidin' men. That damned old judge—it was Lammert—gave a writ. I don't mind the name . . . "

"I do," said Brent grimly. "It was probably a writ *'de lunatico inquirendo'*. It's a writ that orders a man's examination to see if he's crazy or not."

"That's it. He was arrested an' they took him to Tucson. Some doctors there examined him. That 'ere saw-bones you see tonight, that man Nevins, was one of 'em. They certified he was crazy. Homocidal mania they called it, and they locked him up."

Brent let go a great oath that stopped half-uttered.

"All that's on'y the beginnin' of it all," said Livesey. "On top o' that the Court—that's old Lammert again—appointed a guardian for your father to administer his estate. You see, they claimed that old Sam, bein' adjudged crazy, wasn't competent to handle his own affairs. He owed a li'l bit o' money at the bank here in San Simon, an' Ware was one of the directors of the bank. They claimed Sam couldn't attend to business. Even if you, his son, 'd ben here, it would have made no difference. They wanted their own man to handle Cincofuentes. Old Lammert appointed as guardian fer your Dad—as the man to handle the matters for the ranch—Gilbert Ware!"

"But—good God, man! Why didn't you get a lawyer?"

"I did. I seen Ames and Evarts in Tucson. They told me there was nothin' they could do. When the smoke cleared away I found out that Ware owns sixty thousand head o' sheep across the Cataratas. He owns the four thousand that Wilton is runnin' on the Free Range here and waterin' on our water. Ware aims to git Five Springs for his damned sheep."

"Hold on," said Brent sharply. "The title to Cincofuentes lies in my father."

"Yeah. An' he's been declared insane an' locked up as incompetent to handle his own affairs. Ware handles all his business matters. Opp, the new sheriff, takes hold tomorrow. Like I told you . Ware owns him. I'm damned glad you're home, son, but I'm afeard you're like that Prodigy in the Bible what went away an' come back fer grub an' found all was left fer him was hog-feed."

A SUDDEN hammering at the door drew them, and a man tried to enter, but Ben blocked the door with a big foot. The man thrust his head to the crack.

"Is Mr. Halston here?" he asked sharply.

Brent jerked the door open and the man almost fell into the room.

"I'm Mr. Halston," said Brent. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I've got this note for you." The man thrust out a card. "Mr. Gilbert Ware saw your name on the hotel register. He sends word that, if you can spare the time, he'd like to see you in his room at once on a very important matter of business. He's in room two-seventeen. The bridal suite." And the man disappeared down the yawning stair-flight as Brent picked up his gun and stowed it in his waistband.

"You goin' to call that bet?" demanded Ben.

"Huh. Of course I am. I'm goin' to that 'bridal suite,' and if anything happens, sure as hell I'll jam that bridle over Ware's head. You remember the old 'war bridles', Ben?"

Ben knew well enough that simple contrivance of the Horse Indians by means of which the most stubborn horse can be brought to hand. He grinned and stood waiting.

"I'll wait here fer you," he said. "Don't pull your gun unless you mean to use it, Brent, an' if you do use it, remember the head is mostly bones. Shoot at the belly, if you have to shoot at all."

The next minute Brent was gone.

CHAPTER III

BRENT HALSTON DRAWS CARDS

"COME in!"

The door of Number Two-seventeen opened at Brent's touch and he knew that he faced Gilbert Ware. He had never seen Ware before, though he had heard much of him before he left for California Baja. Ware was not at all the sort of a man Brent had expected to see. He had thought to find a typical gangster politician. This was a man of a very different type. He was big and smooth-shaven and very rosy about the gills. He beamed pleasantly at the world from behind gold-rimmed spectacles and he smiled pleasantly as he rose.

"I am particularly glad to see you, Mr. Halston," he said and held out a hand that common courtesy required Brent to take. "The moment I saw your name on the hotel register I realized that I must see you at once so that we can iron out any difficulties that your misinformed friends may have informed you exist."

"I have seen only Mr. Livesey," said Brent coolly. "It is not probable that he has misinformed me about any thing."

"Not willingly or intentionally, of course," said Ware heartily. "Livesey is a capable manager for a ranch but it is barely possible that he himself does not wholly understand matters as they stand today. In fact I am sure he does not have possession of all the facts. I asked you to come here so that I can give you a full and correct statement. I believe, Mr. Halston, that most of the troubles in life arise from misunderstandings. The writer Thoreau, Mr. Halston, wrote that it requires two people to tell the truth: One to speak; the other to listen. I am inclined to think he was right. Sometimes a man who hears wrong and who repeats what he hears commits a grievous error."

"All of which comes to . . . what?" asked Brent. He eyed Ware keenly. This was not the shrewd, adept crooked politician, graduate of the crooked gambling hells from Iron Fork to Sonora. This was a big kindly genial man who felt himself misjudged and who desired to set himself straight before the world. A man whose very softness and affability were disarming.

"It all leads to this most unfortunate matter of your father," said Ware quickly. "Things are in a mess, Mr. Halston. There can be no argument about that and I have every wish to have matters adjusted in regard to your father, for whom I have a high regard, as soon as may be. I doubt if even Mr. Livesey knows how much of a mess things are in. He may have, doubtless has, told you of the troubles that your father had with the Wiltons. . . ?" Brent nodded, his eyes on Ware. "That was most unfortunate. Wilton is not as evil as your father and Livesey believed. Wilton is an

uncouth but kindly man if he is not rubbed the wrong way. Livesey unfortunately rubbed him the wrong way. So did your father. I don't blame either of them; I merely say it was unfortunate. Wilton is a farmer, not a rancher and he carries a chip perpetually on his shoulder because he feels that the ranchers here look down on him. In a way they do, too. Wilton and his son bought out the Fullers. That made your father angry. He had always wanted to buy that claim from Fuller, but he was too late. The mere fact that your father was so anxious to buy that claim went far to establish Wilton's argument about Five Springs being on the Free Range. Then too your father had an obsession. Being a cattle-man he hated sheep and Wilton runs sheep. Then began that unfortunate wrangle over the water-rights to Five Springs."

"I have heard that you too are interested in sheep," said Brent.

"Sheep? Yes. Mine? Yes. I am interested, Mr. Halston, in all our industries; in any thing that will help to place our state in the forefront of our well-to-do commonwealths. To go on: then came a personal row with Wilton. You must remember that Wilton is a Dry Farmer and he couldn't understand your father's attitude. As you may have heard Wilton watered his sheep at the Springs and your father drove him off. Then your father resorted to the methods he had practiced in his youth and pulled a gun on Wilton and threatened him. It was very fortunate for your father that Wilton did what he did do. He simply swore out a warrant for your father's arrest. Then after a careful examination by selected specialists your father was found and declared to be mentally unsound. Marked homicidal tendencies was the verdict. And he was declared unsafe to be allowed at large. His immediate incarceration was ordered. Of course under the circumstances a guardian had to be appointed by the court. Judge Lammert, who is a very conservative man, selected me. I assure you it is not a pleasant task, Mr. Halston."

"I can understand that." Brent had determined that under no circumstances would he lose his temper. "But I do not quite understand why some intimate friend of my father was not selected."

"I think I can explain that. Your father owed some money to the bank here in San Simon. I am a director of that bank and it was held advisable for me to be appointed so that I could act for the interests of your father as well as for the bank."

"I . . . see . . . " A curious note in Brent's voice made Ware glance at him. He was not at all sure that Brent was taking what he said as he wished. "Now that I have returned home, I will, as my father's son, take legal steps to have you relieved of this unpleasant task. I will apply to be appointed his guardian."

"I WILL be very glad of it," said Ware pleasantly. "But it will take some time, I fear. Judge Lammert is not easy to move when he has once made up his mind. Then too, you must remember that while you went away from here a boy, you are hardly known here as a business man of extended experience. You understand, I am sure."

Brent was beginning to understand. Before he could frame a reply the door of the room banged open and a big man bulked in the door-way. Instantly Brent recognized him. It was Opp, Opp the killer whom he had knocked flat in the bar-room a while before.

For just a split second Opp, dazzled by the flood of lights, saw nothing.

Then he recognized Brent. His hand dropped to his holster and sudden murder would have been done but for Ware. With a swiftness not to have been looked for in a man to his bulk he stooped quickly and snatched at the rug on which Opp stood. He seized that rug and jerked it with all his force and Opp's legs flew from under him. He fell with a crash, his head hit the floor with a dull smack and instantly Brent snatched at the gun as it dropped. He snapped it open, dropping the cartridges into his hand and stood waiting. Ware re-seated himself, removed his glasses and slowly polished them with his handkerchief while Opp slowly rose and rubbed the back of his head in a dazed way. Ware was the first to speak.

"That is no way to enter a gentleman's private room, Mr. Opp," he said reprovingly. "I take it that you and Mr. Halston have had some previous personal disagreement. You can't settle it here, Sir. This room is not the Free Range."

"Halston?" Opp almost snarled the word. "You tell me this man's named Halston? Is he any kin to the crazy Halston . . The one you got locked up . . . I mean that Wilton did. . ."

"His son," said Ware sharply. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, Mr. Opp. If you wish to see me on business, Mr. Opp, you'd better wait till I finish with Mr. Halston. I'll send word to you in the lobby when I am through here."

Opp drew himself up in attempted dignity and Brent handed him the empty gun. Opp took it, noted the empty cylinder, holstered it and shambled toward the door. The moment that door closed behind Opp, Ware turned to Brent.

"This is most unfortunate," he said. "Most unfortunate. I would have given much to have prevented a clash between you and Opp. He has just been elected sheriff and takes told at once. The matter is doubly unfortunate because Mr. Opp holds your father's note for thirty thousand dollars."

"Thirty thousand hell!" Brent exploded. "Why Dad always had all the money he needed. If he wanted money why didn't he go to the bank or to a personal friend? Why should he have gone to this man Opp? Opp's a new man in the country. He wasn't here when I went away. Now in five years, I find him elected sheriff and holdin' a thirty thousand dollar note on the richest ranch in the whole valley. I don't believe it."

"I am sorry for that," said Ware evenly. "I can understand and make allowance for your excitement, Mr. Halston. In fact I may say that is a—a feature of the very excitement that led to your father's incarceration. Undue excitement over trifles. I believe the doctors have a professional name for it. They call it 'latitantcy'. I have been told it means an undue secretiveness and desire for concealing things that are of no importance. That induces excitement over these very trifles. When the whole matter is boiled down, Mr. Halston, it amounts to this: Sheriff Opp holds your father's note for thirty thousand dollars. He has come to me on two occasions since I have been appointed your father's legal guardian and has asked that the matter be settled. No interest has been paid on the note in two years, I believe. So far I have held him off for this reason, if Opp sues on the note and gets judgment, as he will, the ranch of Cincofuentes will have to be sold to satisfy the judgment of court. It will have to be sold at auction. Some years ago it would have

brought much more than that but that was before that unfortunate litigation arose with Wilton over the water-rights of the Springs. No man wants to buy a lawsuit. If the courts decide that the Springs are on the Free range the ranch is not worth even a small part of the note. Wilton has entered suit and I am told he has a very strong case. That's the crux of the matter. You can't get thirty thousand dollars for Cincofuentes ranch to save your immortal soul. I have been trying to induce Sheriff Opp to take over the ranch in complete satisfaction of the note without taking the matter up in court. See? He objects until the court settles the title."

"Where is that note?" demanded Brent dazedly. Vague memories more than five years old recalled the facts that his father had rarely had to borrow money; that he had never been poor. He remembered noisy but decent poker-parties at Cincofuentes and horse-races on the bottom land below the house. He suddenly recollected one particular race when old Sougan Kane lost five thousand dollars on a three hundred yard race. After that he always figured that that race cost him just sixteen dollars and sixty cents a yard. Poverty had been a *non sequitur* in the old days at Cincofuentes and Brent could not realize it now. What he had learned from Livesey and now from Ware was unbelievable. He could not realize that such things could happen in the world in which he lived. Down in California Baja, where he had lived for five years, when men had grievances they shot them out. Here they stole all they coveted and did it under guise of the law. Ware went on:

"SHERIFF OPP has that note in his possession. I have seen it, of course. That was my duty as your father's representative. Now, Mr. Halston, I am anxious to co-operate with you in every way that is possible. Please think matters over and if there is any way that I can assist you do not hesitate to come to me."

Brent rose and ignored the proffered hand. "I'll think matters over for a day or two, Mr. Ware," he said. "I came home only for a brief visit but these developments may change my plans." And a moment later the door closed behind him and he stood in the gas-lit hall.

Even as that door closed behind him a sudden thought came to him . . . Opp! The newly elected sheriff! When Opp had entered Ware's room he had not entered it as a stranger would. He had banged the door open as only an equal or an intimate could have done. His entrance was not a formal entrance. What did that mean? How close were Ware and Opp? Ben Livesey had said that Ware had bought Opp's election and that Ware owned the sheriff. Was that true? The heavy thump! thump! of heavy ascending feet came to him. Some one was coming up the stairs. He leaned over the balusters and, glancing down the dark well of the stair-way recognized Opp's head and shoulders as he came up the stair-flight.

Brent glanced swiftly about him. Ware's room was a corner room. The public bath lay to its left, for San Simon boasted no private baths in its one hotel. One either bathed in a tin tub in cold water or he carried hot water from the kitchen to the public bath or . . . did not bathe at all. The last was the most popular. He stepped inside the public bath-room and gently closed the door. A moment later he heard Opp's heavy, stealthy tread as he passed the door; then Ware's door creaked

open and closed and he heard Opp's rumbling note.

"That damned fool's gone at last has he? What in hell'd he want?"

"He came at my request," said Ware. "Old Livesey from Cincofuentes saw him first and loaded him up with dope. I had to see him to counteract that if I could. I don't know whether I did it or not. He knows now that you hold his father's note for thirty thousand dollars." At that both men laughed and Brent felt his gorge rise though he was not sure as to the exact cause. "I tried to show him that I'm his father's legal guardian for his own good. Don't you see now, you hulking fool, that my plan is best?"

"Yeah! I reckon so. All the same I know damned well that if we'd done like I said an' plugged old Halston while he was ridin' home one dark night, we'd have had none of this damned legal mess."

"You damned fool," Ware's voice sounded like cold steel on stone and made every hair on Brent's neck bristle. "If old Sam Halston had been killed another heir would have turned up, this very son, and we'd have had the same to do over again. If there had been no heir of the blood, the State would have taken over the property. As it is old Sam Halston's locked up crazy and I'm trustee and guardian for his property. You've got a note that'll swallow up all that property and in a year there won't be a head of Cincofuentes stock this side of the Cataratas. The whole land'll be sheep. My flocks can range clear to the Mexican Line and water where we choose. All you have to do is to obey orders. If you do that the whole game is in our hands. In the mean time keep your fool mouth shut."

"That's easy to say," growled Opp. "Me and that man Halston had a run-in in the bar-room down stairs. He hit me when I wasn't lookin'. If I let that go, I'll have some killin' to do an' I just been elected sheriff. I can't afford to lose standin'."

At that Ware laughed out-right. "I heard about that," he said. "I heard that you shot an unarmed man in a wrangle over a card-game. He probably had it coming to him. Nobody knew who he was did they? Nobody's likely to raise a fuss over it, hey?"

"Not likely," Opp grunted. "Nobody knows who he was an' nobody keered a whole lot. He was just a drifter; here today and gone tomorrer. They'll plant him in Boot Hill."

"I don't care what they do with him," said Ware coldly. "I just don't want him to upset my plans. I happen to need you at this particular time. All I care for right now is to get the water-rights to Cincofuentes."

"THEN you're all kinds of a damned fool," said Opp frankly. "I been here as long as you have an' I tell you this, the minute you bring your sheep across the Cataratas every cattle-man in the Valley'll sure as hell go on the prod."

"What the hell need I care," said Ware. "I'll have the law back of me, wont I?"

"Yeah, You will," Opp laughed raucously. "You'll have the law back of you an' the judge, Lammert that is, an' the whole bar too. The bar used always to be in front of you in the old days."

"Well? What're you afraid of then?"

"The law an' the judge you bought an' the bar may be so damned far behind you that it can't catch up with you," sneered Opp. "I never yet seen a man so smart that somebody couldn't out-smart him. Who knows this son of the old man? This man Brent Halston? He may be a bigger king-pin than we reckon on. I know old man Ben Live-

sey is plain an' fancy pizen when he gits started. This man may be like him."

"You listen to me," Ware's voice was a snarl, "and don't forget what I say. This young dogie's came back from Greaser Land all pepped up with his own importance. Livesey at Cincofuentes has filled him up with his notions too. They think they can buck me. I've just given him our version of the affair. Lammert and Nevins and the rest'll stick by what they've done. They've got to or go busted. They've got to stick now. They've gone too far to draw back. Lammert doesn't dare back trail. I hold a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage on his house. Wilton and his son will do what I say and by God! when I crack my whip you'll jump too."

"Who said I won't?" demanded Opp. "All I'm sayin' is it'll sure be hard for me to keep from crackin' down on that bird Halston when I meet him. If I swaller what he done, men'll say I lost my nerve."

"Keep out of his way then for a while. I'll get rid of him. I'll run him out of the country, or I'll have you do it, as soon as I figure out a sure way. I see one way right now to do it."

"All right," Brent could hear Opp's heavy breathing. "Give me a drink will you?" Liquor gurgled into a glass and Opp drank. "What I want to know's this, what's come of the money you was goin' to cut four ways? You an' Lammert an' Wilton an' me? The cattle that we've been long-ropin' and shippin' across the Cataratas to Red Water. I know them cows brung good prices 'cause I seen Wilson from Lapwing an' he told me. I never smelt that money. I'm gettin' damned sick o' ridin' the range to keep your damned sheep-herders outen trouble. There ain't no sense in it that I kin see.'

"I don't suppose you do see it," growled Ware. "If twenty thousand sheep hadn't been shifted on the heels of every drive of Cincofuentes cattle that were run across the Cataratas you'd have been hung long ago."

"Huh. So that was why, huh?"

"Of course it was. Ten flocks of sheep driven across the cattle trail trampled out all trail sign so nobody could say sheep or cows went over the ground. Those cattle from Cincofuentes just wandered up into the hills and dropped out of sight. That's all! Remember! You keep clear of this man Brent Halston till I give the word. He'll get what's coming to him but not till I'm ready."

Brent drew a shivering breath. With all the luck in the world on his side he could never have hoped to have Ware's plans to clearly exposed for his scrutiny. The whole hand was laid out for him to see. He knew every move that had been made; every move that was planned had been bared. The thing to do now was to make a quick counter-attack. First of all he must get back to Ben who was waiting for him in his room.

He pulled off his boots and padded quietly down the hall in his stockinged feet. A single gas-jet whistled and stunk in the half-gloom but no one saw him as, keeping to the dark edge of the hall, he hurried back to his room where old Ben Livesey waited. The old man rose as Brent entered.

"Well Son, d'you git his scalp?" he asked.

"I got better than his scalp," said Brent. "I got his whole lay-out. He's a mighty plausible bird, Ben."

"If he hadn't been, he'd have been in jail long ago," grunted Ben: "Go on."

Sitting on the edge of the bed Brent told every detail of what he had heard and as those details developed; as old Ben learned how his men at Cincofuentes had been hood-winked by a lot of sheep-herders, instructed by an ex-

gambler, his gorge rose. Had Ware seen him then he might have realized that he was playing with fire and live-fire at that. But Ben uttered no word till Brent was through; then:

"That's a fine combination, Ware, Wilton, both father an' son; Lammert, them doctors an' Opp just takin' hold as sheriff. Looks like we're up against a steep game, son."

"Of course," Brent poured himself a drink and sipped it thoughtfully. "First, we've got make Ware think that we believe his story. To do that we'll have to start legal steps. They'll lead no-where but it'll be like smoke in their eyes. It'll keep 'em from seein' our real trail."

"Well git out to Cincofuentes now," said Ben. "I'll git the buck-board."

In a half-hour he was ready and the half-broken horses took the trail at a gallop and with each plunging lurch Brent felt his heart give an extra leap. It had been good to make his own way in California Baja asking aid from no man. To have been foreman and finally manager of the great Trevizos rancho was a matter of pride to any man but . . . This was better! After all this was his own place. His mother slept under the giant alamos, cotton-woods, back of Cincofuentes and his heart seemed to be anchored there. His thoughts flew to his father. He could understand exactly how his father had fallen to the plan that Ware had devised. Kindly, generous, believing all men to be honest and well-meaning, his father was exactly the type to lose to Ware. He registered a solemn oath as they rattled along the rough trail through the night.

"You'll find a sight o' changes here," Ben waved a whip-stock toward a light that stood out against the blue-black Arizona sky. "That's Mis' Gordon's lamp. She's settin' up late."

"Who's Mis' Gordon?" asked Brent. The name was new to him.

"You don't know about them. They're new since you left. About a year and half ago old Mis' Gordon come here with her daughter an' Sam rented 'em the old Benn place. Just the house an' truck-patch you know. It's on'y about a half mile from the ranch-house you remember. They're artists and the old lady—she ain't so derned old, at that—told me her daughter wanted to come out here fer local color whatever that is. She carries it in li'l tin tubes." Brent chuckled at that. "I'll say one thing fer the daughter. She shore kin draw an' paint pictures mighty pretty. Most as good as chromos they are. She kin paint cows so derned life-like they look like they'll give milk. That man Wilton thinks so, too."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean the son, that damned Jeff Wilton. I told you about them Wiltons. The old man brung suit about the ownership of the Springs. I ordered 'em off the water till the suit is settled an' the courts says who owns the Springs. I got the Springs all wire-fenced before old Lammert handed down an injunction forbiddin' me to do it but them Wiltons keep cuttin' the wire to get their damned sheep on the water."

"I'll attend to that the very first thing," said Brent and old Ben stared at him. "You were talkin' about Miss Gordon and Wilton."

"Oh yes, Miss Ethel—that's the daughter—she hates the very sight o' Jeff Wilton. Before old Sam was arrested and put in the bug-house he found out that Jeff Wilton was annoyin' Miss Ethel. You see the damned fool sort o' figgers that if he kin close-herd her he kin keep all other men away from her an' that mebbee she'll go crazy some day an' marry him. If any Wilton ever thought of anything as decent as marryin' . . . Anyhow our

men've got orders to ride herd on Miss Ethel. That was what Sam figgered on. To have our men run Wilton's sheep offen our land and keep Jeff Wilton from annoyin' of Miss Ethel. Lee was told off to ride herd on her. That was kind o' funny too it was this a-way.

"Seems like Miss Ethel was paintin' a picture of a cow an' her calf one day. The calf got stuck in a dry arroyo an' got down an' the cow was tryin' to make it git up on its feet when Miss Ethel come along an' started to paint 'em. Lee come along about then an' set there with one leg slung over his saddle-horn watchin'. He'd never seen any paintin' 'ceptin' when old Juan white-washes the hog-pen at the ranch an' he was plumb curious. Finally he couldn't stand the strain.

"'What you-all aimin' to do with that when you git done, Miss?' he asks.

"'Sell it, I hope,' says Miss Ethel through a mouth-full o' brushes.

"'Uh-huh,' said Lee, 'I hope so too. If you don't mind, Miss, I'd sure like to know what they pay you fer a picture like that.'

"'About a hundred dollars,' says Miss Ethel.

"'My Good God,' says Lee an' he like to fell off his saddle. 'Old Ben Livesey'll sell you the cow fer twenty-five dollars.'

"She kind o' choked at that an' puts her head on one side an' looks cock-eyed at the drorin', 'I wish I could git that dam', she says.

"'Ma'am?' says Lee. He'd never hear a girl like her swear. 'The what?' he says again.

"'The dam — Mother,' says Miss Ethel.

"'The damned mother!' says Lee. He was settin' there pie-eyed when I rode up an' Miss Ethel was laughin' like to die. When he told me what he figgered Miss Ethel had said, he looked like a boy caught writin' nasty words on a church door.

"'You fool', I says to him. 'A dam *is* a mother.'"

"'It is like hell,' says Lee an' Miss Ethel like to busted. 'A dam is a water-hole. What do you think I am?'

"'A damned fool,' I says. 'An' that kind of a dam ain't neither a water-hole nor a mother either.' Here we are at the ranch-house."

CHAPTER IV

RAIDING THE RAIDERS

JUAN PATEROS, the old Mexican cook who had worked for nearly a generation at Cincofuentes, pounded on the huge iron triangle outside the kitchen and summoned the ranch and bunk-house to breakfast. They trooped in, all nine "waddies." They knew Livesey had gone to town to meet Brent, and they were curious to know what Brent would be like. A few of them remembered him vaguely as a hard-riding youngster, but knew no more. He was younger than any of them but Lee and Sykes. He was just a kid. How could a boy handle such matters as had developed in the Valley? Matters that baffled even old Ben Livesey.

Brent met them quietly, coolly, even-eyed. The great Trevizos rancho in California Baja had had two hundred vaqueros on its pay-rolls, and a dozen cow-punchers of his own kind did not embarrass him. He knew Lee, a kid when Brent left home, and Sykes and Norton and McGinn, and shook hands with them warmly; then old Juan fairly drove them into the dining room.

But that meal was destined to be brief. Juan, in the act of pouring

coffee for Weeks, was thrust suddenly aside and a Niagara of hot coffee filled Weeks' sleeve, causing a volley of good-natured profanity as Parsons, fresh from night-herding, faced Livesey. Parsons' face was crusted with sweat and alkali, and the dust rose in clouds as he stamped across the floor.

"For God's own sake get the men out," he croaked. "A bunch o' rustlers jumped us just before sun-up. Me an' Roberts couldn't stand 'em off. There was shootin'! I seen there was no use stayin', so I come back. Roberts is there, I reckon. He was on the other side of the herd."

He snatched a cup of coffee and downed it at a gulp.

For one brief second silence held; then chairs crashed back, plates clattered and riot broke out as the men heaved themselves away from the table. Brent's voice rose above the clamor.

"Here! . . Ben! . . . Livesey! . . . Take hold here! Quick, men! Listen! You men all sit down . . . . !"

Lee glanced at him and suddenly jerked Weeks to a chair. The rest milled about uncertainly.

"What were you doin' out there night-herdin'?" asked Brent of Parsons. Parsons glanced at Livesey to ask if he should answer. Livesey nodded.

"Me an' Roberts was herdin' five hundred head o' stock. They was to be sent over to Lapwing, and about five men jumped us. I ain't sure. They was every damned one of 'em masked. I could see that. The light wasn't good. I couldn't recognize them. Like I say, they were masked with black masks."

"How long ago did they jump you?"

"About two hours ago. Just before sun-up. I ain't seen Roberts. He was on the far side of the herd when it happened. I was on the West side an' they broke away from me."

"Of course," Brent nodded. "They broke up-wind, of course. They always do. Then the wind was blowin' straight down from the Cataratas . . . " He knew that dark, forbididng range of hills, and he knew that a dawn-wind from the Cataratas meant a gale by noon, a gale that would last till sun-set. "You men all get your rifles," he said sharply. "Saddle up and some one pick a horse for me. Juan"—he turned on the old cook, who watched him with kindling eyes—"make up grub and get coffee for two days for seven men. I want seven," he said to Livesey.

AT that old Ben Livesey came suddenly to life. It had seemed natural to have a Halston take hold of Cincofuentes matters, but, after all, he himself was manager when old Sam was absent.

"I'll 'tend to this," he began, but Brent pulled him aside.

"Listen to me, Ben," he said in a low, tense tone. "This is all part of Ware's plan. I told you what I heard him plan with Opp; how he used his sheep to trample out the trail of the cattle Opp's men stole. You watch the ranch and let me handle this."

"But you have no legal authority to act for me. You got no authority. Ware knows who our men are."

"I've got the best authority in all God's world," said Brent. He tapped his open holster. "Few men question it. I'll mask our men, since masking has become the fashion on the ranges here."

"What're you goin' to do?" Ben's tone was still uncertain. "What's your plan?"

"This. That herd was jumped just before dawn, while it was still dark. Those rustlers knew better than to try to stampede them to run South. They'd

have run themselves out among the big Valley ranches and we'd have had them back in a day or so. They're headin' those stolen cattle right into the Cataratas, just as Ware and Opp planned. The minute they cross the Pass some of Ware's damned sheep 'll turn up most opportunely to trample out all trail sign. We'll lose every one of those five hundred head if we don't act quickly. All right! Now listen! They've got to travel twenty miles to reach the hills where they can scatter. They'll have to water before they start. That'll take a good half hour. After that the cattle 'll be full of grass and water. They'll be logy as all hell. That'll slow up their gait and with this gale from the Cataratas in their faces they'll be plain hell to handle. Five men 'll have all they can do to make 'em face a gale."

"Well!" said Ben uncertainly. "What then?"

"Huh. I'll mask our men, too. I'll cut in ahead of them and meet them on the saddle of Windy Pass. If they don't hit the Cataratas at Windy Pass they'll have to travel twenty-two miles to Coyote Cut."

"Then what?" Old Ben's lips tightened and his eyes twinkled like bits of glass. Brent's eyes focused on him. Then the astonished old manager saw a light of utter deviltry dawn in the eyes that looked into his. Brent's eyes seemed to emit sparks and for the first time he grinned.

"Tell me this," he said. "Does this new sheriff, Opp, own any cattle?"

"Cattle an' sheep both," said Ben. "He runs a few head o' cattle on the Free Range, but he runs mostly to sheep. Why?"

"What's his range brand?"

"O Bar. Like this." Ben seized a fork and drew on the table-cloth a letter and a figure. "What's that got to do with it?"

"The Lord's good to us," said Brent piously. His heavy-handed slap almost threw old Ben into the yawning fireplace. "Listen, Ben. On the range we fight fire with fire. I'm going to start trouble between Opp and Ware. I heard Ware remind Opp that they had been rustling Cincofuentes stock before. Fine. Of course, these masked rustlers are Opp's men. They're bound to be. Opp runs his own brand on the Free Range. We'll just take our own cattle from Opp's men, change the Cincofuentes brand into the O-Bar. Then we'll chase the stuff off to Lapwing, where Opp's men are headin' anyhow, and sell it. Then I'll deposit the cash to Opp's account and send word to Ware that Opp has got the cash. See?"

"Be damned if I do," said Ben heatedly. "What good 'll that do?"

"HUH. When Ware learns that Opp has stolen the cattle and taken all the cash, how much will Ware love Opp? Opp can never explain. If he gives Ware the money, Ware 'll always think Opp got more and is double-crossin' him. It'll sure start war between Opp and Ware."

"And we'll be payin' the war loan," said Ben grimly.

"Of course," Brent laughed, "I'll see that Cincofuentes doesn't lose. I'll give you my check for ten dollars a head for the five hundred. We can square matters later. But you be damned careful you don't cash that check. It's good, all right, but we don't want to run any risk of Ware gettin' his claws on it as trustee for the ranch. See?"

"How'll you change the brands? You'll have no irons. We ain't got a runnin' iron on the ranch."

"Huh. You haven't lived in California Baja. Any straight piece of

iron 's a runnin' iron when you need one. Is that old brandin' pen still standin' in the jaws of Windy Pass?"

"It was a bit ago. What'll you do for irons?"

"Cinch rings and a wet blanket. I'll take a steel from the kitchen, too, in case we need it. Get me a couple of bed sheets to make into masks and get the office shears."

Livesey hurried to his office and came back with sheet and shears, and the scurry and rush at the corral rose to a storm. Then seven men led up to the porch, and Brent handed each man a white bandage in which he had cut huge eye-holes.

"These'll do," he said. "One thing now. If we strike those birds and any talkin' has to be done, leave it all to me. They may know your voice. They'll not know mine. Ready? Who've I got?"

"Lee, Weeks, Burton, Sykes, McGinn, Norton, Thomas and Parsons 'll go along with you," said Ben. "Now, you all, listen to me. You don't have to mix it up in this here mess unless you choose. You may have to leave the Valley if this gits out. Any man who wants to quit, quit right now. There'll be no hard feelin's."

"You please go to hell, Mr. Livesey," said McGinn pleasantly. "A man mayn't *have* to go to a picnic, but mostly he goes. We all been on the Cincofuentes rolls for four years now, an' you can't head us off from the first real frolic."

"Go on, darn you," said Ben, and a little grin started to twist his grim lips. "Get to hell an' gone out o' here."

They went in a clattering rush that paid scant heed to corral bars, and when the red dust wreath settled over the mesquite tops, old Ben turned back into the ranch-house. He was content to leave the matter to Brent.

Whatever Brent thought, he said little. The men eyed him covertly from time to time as they swept along the trail. To them Brent Halston was an unknown quantity. He was yet to be proven. It was one thing to start off in a wild rush when every impulse called for immediate action. To carry out that foolish plan when the blood had cooled was a different matter. Too, every man in that party knew that those five rustlers would fight. Rustlers *had* to fight when caught.

MILE after mile of mesquite studded plain folded away behind them. The bulked alamos—cottonwoods—of Five Springs closed down into the red plain, and the distant ranges of the Cataratas took form in jagged lines. Each man knew that if those cattle ever got into the mazes of those hills they would be lost till a general round-up took place. Even then they would probably be lost.

"We turn off here!"

Every fold of the hills was old, familiar land to Brent. He forced his reluctant pony into a tangle of cat's-claw, almost threw him bodily into a wide, deep arroyo that would be a torrent in the Rainy Season and hurled him Northward at a gallop. "It's not far now," he called over his shoulder. "They've got to keep to the flat land as far as they can to make time, but they can't travel more'n three miles an hour! Yonder's Windy Pass."

It rose before them in a wide gap with steep hills on each side. The grade rose to the saddle and to right and left of that saddle the blue hills of the Cataratas rose steeply in forbidding masses.

"Look! We're ahead of 'em. They haven't made the Pass yet." Brent thrust his pinto to a crest and his gauntleted hand pointed to a low cloud of thick red dust that swirled along

the mesquite tops. "They're travelin' even slow 'n I hoped they would. They've got their bellies full of grass an' water. We'll head 'em in the foothills."

He edged his pony back behind the crest of the "hog-back" and waved to his men to spread out so they would raise little dust. Then, riding belly-to-earth, they headed for the Pass through which that stolen herd must pass.

The moment his pony crossed the sharp ridge, Brent motioned his men to dismount. Far below them on the sloping up-grade to the Pass they saw the on-coming herd. If those cattle had been stampeded, they had recovered from their fright. Cattle full of grass and water can not stampede far. They were heading for the Pass in a long, irregular column, and at the sides and rear of that column Brent could see men riding. He counted them. Five men! One man rode on each flank and three men "dragging." There was no "point." None was needed when the trail to the front was so plain. He chuckled at the simplicity of it all. Those raiders had no thought of being headed at the Pass and they believed themselves well ahead of any pursuit that might be sent to follow them from Cincofuentes. He checked his pony and swung a hand to his men.

"Put on your masks," he said sharply. "And remember, if it comes to talkin', leave it all to me. Weeks, you take the left flank. Burton, to the right. Get into position under cover well out on the flanks of the herd and stay under cover until you get a signal from me. If you see me wave my hat, then you ride out into plain view. If you see me *drop my hat,* open fire, and don't waste time firin' at the horses, either. If I signal for fire, *get your man.*"

THEY eyed him approvingly. This was stuff that they could understand. He knew what he meant to do. They saw that he trusted himself, so they, too, trusted him. When Brent saw both of his men in place, he glanced at the open Pass behind him. The wind had risen to a half-gale and was booming through the live-oaks with a roar like heavy surf. To right and left the jaws of the Pass swept up to a low summit, and the steep slopes were covered with a rank growth of sun-dried grass.

"Take my horse a second, Sykes." Sykes caught the flung rein by the *moral*—the long thong at the end of the reins—and Brent, striking a match on his pistol-butt, cupped it in his hands and thrust it deep into the heart of a clump of dried grass. The flame caught with a fierce little crackle and leaped six feet to another clump as the wind drove it.

"Look . . . ! Looky there . . . ! Sykes laughed as a great jack-rabbit broke cover and headed down-hill, leaping like a kangaroo. "That old jack sure smells trouble."

So did the herd!

That heavy, acrid smoke, driving down wind with the speed of a running horse, blanketed a huge herd-bull. He threw up his head and swung it scythe-like, ripping open the shoulder of a surging steer. The wind, the stinging alkali dust, the too-rapid gait, the yells and shouts and the stinging blows from looped riatas started that bull and the red demon fire in his front completed what those other things had started. He flung up his head and with a deep, rumbling roar doubled straight back into the herd. They gave way instantly, then wheeled and followed him. The mass doubled back-trail at a lumbering gallop and the three men "dragging" drove their spurs

into the rowel seats in a rush for safety. The moment that wild rush started, Brent rode out into full view on the hog-back and waved his hat. Instantly Weeks and Burton, too, rode into view on the flanks and, rifle on thigh, sat waiting for what might happen. Sykes, too, gathered his horse, but Brent stopped him.

"Let the herd go," said Brent; "they'll stop in a mile or so. Our business is with the men. The cattle 'll mill in the first low land. Look!"

A wisp of white smoke jetted from one of the riders and a flat report drifted to them. Sykes stared hard at the man who had fired.

"I know that horse," he said sharply. "That's Vinton's horse. He's one of Opp's men! Let him have it!"

Sykes threw himself flat and his chin cuddled his rifle-stock, but Weeks' rifle cracked from the distant ridge and Vinton's horse plunged to earth on his nose. Brent turned to his men:

"Follow me and surround 'em," he said. "We don't want a long-range fight."

Opening well out to right and left, his men swept down the hill on the heels of the running herd, and with riflemen to right and left and rear, the five rustlers saw they had no chance of escape. The gully behind them was jammed with massed cattle, on each flank Burton and Weeks still sat their horses, and in their front Brent and his men rode like an avalanche. The five men gathered in a dark-faced ring and scowled uncertainly as Brent rode up.

"Every damned man of 'em's on Opp's pay-roll," muttered McGinn. "I know every one of 'em. Hell's sweepin's they are, too. Any one of 'em 'd shoot you in the back for a plugged nickel."

"We'll not give them a chance." Brent sent his horse down the slope in a series of long leaps and his voice rang out above the hurrying wind. "If you men fire another shot," he shouted, "we'll shoot you down like mad coyotes! Shoot it out or up with your hands."

"That's Vinton all right." Sykes pressed forward. "Weeks 's comin 'in! Look at Vinton. He'll be the man in charge here."

VINTON came forward slowly, his face working with passion. He knew he could expect scant mercy. Men caught red-handed, rustling cattle, do not expect it. Truculence and some fear showed in his face as he faced his masked opponents.

"Tell your men to shed their hardware and ride in." Brent's voice cut like a whip-lash.

Vinton eyed him uncertainly; then he turned and shouted an order over his shoulder and his men shame-facedly rode in. Under Brent's watchful eyes and the threatening muzzles of the Cincofuentes rifles, pistol belts were shed and guns and rifles were dropped in a little heap. Then Brent turned to Sykes and McGinn.

"Take their ropes and tie their hands," he said. "If a man resists, he'll be killed."

Any one of those five men would have taken a one-to-ten chance, but there was no such chance. The Cincofuentos rifles would have cut down the first man who resisted, and they knew it. In five minutes they were literally "hog-tied" and stood glaring with hatred at their captors. Vinton alone was undisturbed. He knew that moment he and his men were turned over to Opp, the new sheriff, they would be released on bail by order of Judge Lammert.

"Who's in charge here?" asked Brent.

No answer. The men stared un-

certainly at each other, but no man spoke.

"Coyotes in pack follow a leader," said Brent very gently. "I'm not the most patient man in the world. I ask you for the last time. Who's in charge here?"

"He's payin' us." A man nodded at Vinton and was roundly cursed for it. Then a sudden shout from Burton made Brent stop and stare. Burton was spurring in from the right. His horse was covering the ground like a lambent flame and his spurs raked his horse at every stride. He almost flung his horse to a halt.

"Roberts is over there," he said gaspingly and jerked his hand over his shoulder. "They murdered him. His pony's killed, too."

Brent's face hardened and his men eyed him in silence.

"Take us to the place," he said quietly.

Without a word Burton led them straight to a low swale thick with willow tangle and cat's-claw that had been trampled almost flat. Words were unnecessary. Roberts' gray pony lay in a heap, with his rider in a crumpled mass under his neck. Brent leaped at them, took one long look and straightened up, his eyes blazing.

"Look here, you men!" He motioned to Weeks and McGinn, but he spoke no names. "See if you see what I seem to see. No man on God's earth was ever caught like that and killed by his horse. The man was dead before his horse fell! The pony didn't roll with him. Look there!" He pointed to a small, dark spot edged with blood behind the pony's left fore-leg. "Someone shot that horse. He crumpled up and fell. That's how Roberts died." Brent's face was white as he straightened out the dead body of the rider and pointed to a small dark hole in the left side of the neck. "That man wasn't killed by the fall of his pony. He wasn't run over in any stampede. He was foully murdered by a shot from behind."

Silence fell—a silence so vast and all-embracing that the dull roar of the gale howling down the Pass seemed faint and far-away. A saddle creaked in the stillness and a pony's restless stamping sounded like distant thunder. Then Brent spoke. His words seemed directed to Vinton, but each man took them as directed at himself alone.

"I intended to turn 'em loose and let 'em get back home afoot," he said. "But this changes everything. You! And you!" He pointed to Weeks and Lee but was careful to mention no names. "Guard these men. If one so much as moves, shoot him down. The rest of you come with me."

Wordlessly his men followed him out of ear-shot of the group of uneasy prisoners and pitched in a circle at a sign from him. When they were seated about him he went on:

"This is cold-blooded murder," he said in a low voice. "First of all we will take this matter of Roberts' death."

"Huh. If we take 'em back to San Simon and turn 'em over to the law, they'll be turned loose before we git out o' town," said a voice.

"The law has got them right now," said Brent evenly. "Your people and mine made the law for this country. Frontier Law! They shall have that. No more! No less . . . "

Again silence fell.

CHAPTER V

VIGILANTE VERDICT

FIVE minutes passed. They seemed a life-time. Each man felt that the weight of the universe rested

on him alone, and Brent's voice, when it came, sounded faint and far-away.

"I've brought you aside like this," he said, "because I want to let you see all that I have learned since I came back to my old home. Lee here and Weeks and old Ben Livesey back at Cincofuentes will vouch for me if it's needed. Listen to me."

Then, speaking very slowly and distinctly, he told them every detail of all that had occurred since his return. He stripped bare Ware's plot and showed it in all its ramifications and what it meant for every cattleman in the Valley. He showed them how Ware's money had got him in control of all the forces of law and order. They listened incredulously and involuntarily turned to Lee for support. Lee and Sykes both nodded.

"But . . . but . . . but . . . " Parsons stuttered like machine-gun fire: "But this means that, from now on, if this man Ware puts his plans across, no honest man can be sure of his reputation and his property in the Valley."

"Exactly that." Brent's voice was grim. "At first I intended merely to change the Cincofuentes brand on the stolen cattle to the O Bar, Opp's brand, drive the herd to a market, sell it, deposit the cash to Opp's credit and let Ware learn that Opp had apparently double-crossed him. That would make war between them. Then we could get in our own work. But this matter of Roberts's murder changes all that."

"You mean that our first job is to take these birds back and let the Law look up the evidence of murder?" said a voice. "Is that it?"

A long, pregnant silence assured all that that was not at all what Brent Halston meant. Finally, he put it into words:

"No. I don't mean that at all. I mean that this land was first made a White Man's country by your people and mine. They didn't need to go whinin' to a policeman when murder was committed. They first of all got the murderer, they tried him and executed him. I mean that if these rustlers are taken back to San Simon now, the murderer of Roberts will never be detected or punished. I vote that right here and now we resolve ourselves into a court of Frontier justice. How many of you men own land or cattle or both?"

They looked at each other. Three of them owned small homesteads that they hoped might some day grow into sizable ranchos. Each man regarded himself as a voter and a tax-payer in time of need, but as a unit responsible for the making of laws they had no idea. Brent brought it home to them for the first time. Every man there owned some cattle on the ranges and had his brand registered in the County records.

"I don't want any man to act with me against his own feelings," said Brent. "I'll put it to a vote. The question is: Shall we resolve ourselves into a formal court to try to find out and try the man who killed Roberts and, in case of indisputable evidence, to take proper action? Those in favor of our doing this, raise the right hand. Those who oppose raise the left hand."

Every right hand shot high in the air. Brent nodded.

"All right! Now you, Parsons! You first. Tell us exactly what took place."

"There ain't much to tell," said Parsons. "Me an' Roberts was close herdin' the cattle. We didn't mean to keep 'em out all night, but it got too dark to drive 'em in to the corrals. It was an all-night job an' they was damned skeery. One o' them meteors roared over-head an' put the fear o' God into 'em. Then a coyote must have nipped

a calf. I was off to one side. Roberts was on the other, about where we found him, I reckon. All of a sudden three men rushed me and fired at me. I don't know how they came to miss me. They were almost on top o' me. I got away and fired two shots, but I likely missed, too. Then I heard three shots from over near where Roberts was. I figured he must have got away. Then I rode in to the ranch."

"I see." Brent pondered for a moment. "One of you ride over and get those captured guns. In the meantime we'll examine poor Roberts."

WHILE two men went for the guns, two others carefully examined with Brent the bodies of dead man and horse. Brent finally raised his head.

"It's just about as I figured it must be," he said. "Man and horse, both were shot with a six-gun. They weren't takin' chances on usin' a rifle at night. Whoever killed 'em was so close the skin was powder-burned. Sykes, what do you make of those wounds?"

Sykes groped and pried and finally held up a bullet that he cut from the horse.

"This is sure damned queer," he growled. "Every one o' the guns we took was a forty-five. I noticed that particularly. But this is a thirty-eight! The same kind of a bullet killed Roberts that killed the pony. The same man did both jobs. Some one who used a thirty-eight gun."

"I see." Brent nodded curtly. Then if all those captured guns are forty-fives and Roberts and his horse were killed with a thirty-eight . . ."

"Somebody else done the shootin'," quoth McGinn, but Brent shook his head.

"Wait," he said. "I think there will turn out to be a different solution. There they come with the guns."

The guns fell with a fine clatter and Brent turned to the watching men.

"Bring those rustlers up," he said quietly.

The five men shambled up, a sorry looking bunch, their hands tied and their faces dark with anxiety. They were plainly afraid and ashamed, not of what they had done, but of having been taken in the act. That was a reflection on their skill in crime. They glanced askance at the masked figures about them. Their own experience with masks told them that men masked to commit some deed that they feared to commit if known. Then Brent caught Vinton's arm and whirled him forward and thrust a hand into his pockets. Almost the first article that he dragged out was a mask made of cheap black cloth.

"This proves up part of Parsons' tale," he said. "Parsons said the men were masked." Then he turned to Vinton.

"We don't need your guns," he said. "We're no thieves. Each man can have his own gun, but you'll have no ammunition. Untie each man one by one," he said to the guard. "Let each man take his gun. Then tie his hands again. I'm taking no chances. Make a note of each man's name and the number of his gun. Call their names as they take their guns."

The tied men eyed each other. They dreaded some trap, but they could not fathom this.

"Hargrave," called Sykes. "Take your gun."

Hargrave took his gun and McGinn wrote down the number; then two men deftly re-tied Hargrave's hands and he slunk back like a whipped cur.

"Bonnert . . . ! Liscum . . . ! McGrew . . . !"

Each man stepped forward, knew freedom for a moment, holstered his

restored empty gun, was again tied and slunk back as Hargrave had done. The eyes of all men masked and un-masked centered on Brent. What did this mean? That there was some hidden significance his own men were sure. Finally he stepped forward and picked up the last gun and glanced at the group.

"Seems to be one more gun," he said. "Which man toted two guns?"

"Nobody," growled Bonnert. "You ain't give Vinton his gun yit."

"Oh. That's so! Is this your gun, Vinton?"

HE turned on Vinton, who eyed him with passionate hatred in his gaze.

"Yeah," he snarled. "That's my gun. You damned outlaw, you'll pay for this and don't fergit it, either. I don't know who the hell you are, but I'm tellin' you right now this'll make every man of you ride the Hoot-owl trail. Be sure of that."

"This man Vinton murdered Roberts," said Brent curtly.

His men eyed him in utter silence for a moment.

"How do you figure that?" asked McGinn. And every man hung on Brent's reply. It came in a low tone, as devoid of any passion as ever was a human voice.

"Look at those guns we gave them back," he said. "Every one is a forty-five caliber gun. I let each man pick his own gun. One gun was left. Vinton acknowledges it to be his gun. Look at that last gun that Vinton said is his. It looks like a forty-five, but *it's not!* It's a thirty-eight gun mounted on a forty-five frame. It was the frame that fooled you. You just didn't look at the caliber. You took it for granted. It's the only gun in the outfit that carries a thirty-eight bullet. Now look at this." He held up between finger and thumb the bullet that had been extracted from the dead pony. "This killed Roberts's horse. Another bullet just like this killed Roberts. Both of those bullets came from Vinton's gun. Satisfied?"

A silence as condemning as any verdict held them.

Vinton strove suddenly for speech. His Adam's apple jumped spasmodically and his tongue flicked along the line of his lips. He cursed himself for the ease with which his captor had got at the truth. Who was this man? Who were these associates of his?

Vinton knew that every cattle man in the Valley of the San Simon had just cause to hate and fear Gilbert Ware and Opp, the new sheriff of the County. Ware's plans if carried to fulfillment meant the ruin of every cattle man in the Valley. Could these eight men be the big ranchers banded together to oppose Ware? If so, if these men were from the seven big ranches south of Cincofuentes, it meant that Ware and Opp had passed the safety limit. In the meantime his own neck felt insecure. But when he got back to San Simon he felt sure he could trust Ware. He knew too much about Ware to be disregarded.

"What the hell are you gabblin' about?" he rumbled. "I never killed your man. I was ridin' down the Pass with my men when I seen this herd of cattle without anyone near it. I knowed right well them cattle had been rounded up fer sale. I figgered it'd be the act of a good neighbor to start 'em off. They're not our cattle, if you come to that."

"That's the first word of truth I've heard yet," muttered Weeks, but Brent waved him into silence.

"As fer shootin' your man Roberts goes," said Vinton. "I didn't even know he was dead. I don't know it yet."

"Bring the body over here," said Brent curtly.

Two of his men brought the body over and laid it under a bush.

"You men sit there," said Brent, motioning to a level space. "Just five of you. The other two guard the prisoners. Now we're about ready."

"Ready for what? What the hell 're you aimin' to do?" queried the now thoroughly alarmed Vinton. Brent's coolness, his undoubted leadership, his sureness of speech and gesture all made their impression on him. He wished now that he had never had any dealings with Opp and Ware. "You got no right to try anybody fer anything," he shouted. "You an' your damned tramps ain't no court. You ain't got no authority."

"A WOLF in a trap gets no law," said Brent. "He's killed when he's caught with blood on his paws and dead sheep by him. You were taken with arms in your hands while stealing cattle of the Cincofuentes ranch. I have put before these men evidence that shows that you and you alone shot and killed Roberts. You men have seen and heard that evidence. Are you ready?"

A series of grave nods told him that they were ready. He stepped before the center man of the group, jerked the thoroughly frightened Vinton to his feet and with a swift motion pulled the white mask from his own face.

"I, Brent Halston, son of Samuel Halston, owner of Cincofuentes ranch, accuse this man of the wilful and deliberate murder of Ed Roberts," he said curtly. "I accuse him of the theft of five hundred head of Cincofuentes cattle. You men know all that I know. You have seen and heard all the evidence. What is your verdict? I'll act as judge. It's up to you to find a verdict. How do you say? Guilty or not guilty? It's a Frontier verdict. It's up to you."

"Secret ballot," boomed Parsons. He gathered up a handful of pebbles. "Red stones for Not Guilty; white stones for Guilty," he said.

He gave each man a red stone and sat down.

"Are you ready to vote?" asked Brent.

"Ready! Aye! Ready . . . "

Brent held out his hat and one by one the clenched hands opened and the little fateful pebbles fell into the hat. Then with a swift movement he turned the hat upside down and carefully made his count.

"Six white stones," he announced. "A unanimous verdict of guilty."

The four prisoners grouped behind Vinton grinned sheepishly. What a farce this was! A ridiculous farce! Then a sudden look into Brent's eyes made them realize that it was no farce! They knew suddenly that these men, with whose notion of law and order they had trifled, had taken matters into their own hands.

"You . . .! You . . . !" Vinton strove for speech, but no one paid any attention to him. All eyes were on Brent. He turned on Vinton.

"You have said your say," he reminded him. "You have heard and seen the evidence against you and you have heard the verdict. Have you anything to urge why sentence should not be pronounced against you?"

Say? What can a blood-bespattered wolf urge when caught—when the dogs close in for the kill? But Vinton knew now that he was talking to save his own neck—if he could. He burst into speech, vitriolic curses mingled with sweeping accusations against Ware and Opp and each man of his

It was simple enough, but it took time. There was not much uproar to it, for after all, it was merely hair-branding and hurt little if at all. Running the cinch-ring over the "C", they rebranded the cattle with the "O-Bar" brand of Opp's.

party, who, if Vinton told only half the truth, should have been hung long ago. His curses were mingled with appeals for mercy, a mercy that he had never showed Roberts, for whose death there could be no excuse, for Roberts was shot in full gallop. Brent listened patiently till Vinton stopped, exhausted by his own frenzied appeals. Then he spoke, and every word cut like a rawhide quirt.

"I sentence you to be hanged by the neck," he said, "until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul. The sentence of this court will be carried out at once."

THOSE eleven men stared at him appalled. For a moment they could not realize that this was not just the freak that one's disordered imagination plays at times. Surely this tall, lean youngster dared not carry out his own sentence!

"Get the lariat off my saddle." Brent's voice sounded far off, muted. "It's raw-hide. Put the man on a pony and lead the horse under that big live oak tree. Herd the prisoners over there, too."

Three men had to fight with Vinton to throw him into saddle. He fought and struggled, bit and kicked and finally to his own everlasting disgrace that no man present that day ever forgot, he broke down and wept and prayed for mercy.

"You shall have exactly the same mercy that you showed Roberts." Brent's voice was like chilled steel. "Roberts was performing his paid duty like a man. You stole his herd and needlessly shot him down in cold blood. I would hang you if it was the last act of my life . . . Under that tree with the pony," he said. "And give me the lariat."

He set the loop about Vinton's neck, drew the reins over the pony's head, threw the length of the lariat over a giant limb and knotted the end to the saddle-horn. Then he stepped back and raised his quirt.

No man could ever say that he saw what happened. But all were suddenly aware of a leaping pony that sprang like a wild thing under the sting of the raw-hide. Then, well-trained pony that he was, he stopped when he felt a jerk on the saddle and glanced curiously over his withers while eleven men stood watching, not the dark figure swinging from the great live-oak, but the set face of Brent Halston. He drew a long quivering breath and faced them.

"That's done," he said. "I take all the blame, if there is any. I hope from the bottom of my heart it will never need to be done again. Now you four men listen to me." He called their names. "Hargrave, Bonnett, Liscum, McGrew! You men, with this man Vinton, were sent by Opp and Ware to run off those Cincofuentes cattle. I know every part of the plot. You have seen this day what the men of the Valley think of Ware and Opp and their love of law and order. Keep it up and every one of you will go as Vinton went. I'll give you back your horses and your empty guns and let you go. I hung Vinton because he deliberately committed a foul murder. I've got only stealin' against you. I'm turnin' you loose with a warning. Remember this. I speak for brand owners in this Valley—for every man South of the Cataratas—if any one of you ever refers to this day's work in any way—if any one of you is ever seen this side of the Cataratas, you will be shot on sight. Murder and theft by Ware and Opp are done for in this Valley. Take your horses and—go."

Then Weeks cut loose the raw-hide ropes and Brent motioned to the horses.

"Better not stop this side of Windy Pass," he said. "The trail is open to the North. It's open to you, too, to travel to the South, but you'd better not stop this side of the Mexican Line. For this one trip you go clear. If you ever set foot in this Valley again, you do so at the risk of your lives. Remember."

With his men behind him he stood and watched till the desperately spurring riders rode into the maze of foothills and headed South, where the blue hills of Mexico promised sure refuge.

"I don't think these men will ever trouble us again," he said.

"Huh," growled Sykes. "If they do they're bigger fools 'n I think they are. My God, Brent, but you've hit Ware and Opp a body blow this day. What now?"

"The cattle," said Brent. "We'll find 'em waitin' for us in some of the cross canyons below the Pass. Come on. Let's go."

CHAPTER VI

CINCH RINGS AND RUNNING-IRONS

BRENT was right about the cattle. They found them in two small canons leading from the foothills and in one of those canons . . . Red Willow Cut . . . they found a trickle of dirty water.

"That old brandin' pen's only a mile across the hill," said Brent who six years before had helped to build it. "Let 'em drink here, then we'll get 'em across to the brandin' pen."

It turned out to be an all-day job for the pen had to be repaired with some lodge-pole timber that they found on the hills and that night they close-herded the cattle in the narrow canon. While his men slept Brent calculated his chances of success against Ware and he could not delude himself with false hopes. Ware had money and pull and he and Ben Livesey had neither. Ten years before, when Cincofuentes was the prize show place of the County, things had been different. Then the master of Cincofuentes had been a power in the land. Today Sam Halston seemed to have fallen from his high estate and through no fault of his own. Brent could only attribute it to . . . Ware.

First and most necessary in his plans was to make a break between Ware and his lieutenant Opp. He was sorry about the Vinton matter, but that was distinctly a side-issue and had to be handled when it come up. One thing, Ware would learn now that he could not do as he chose with impunity. Also it would make men wary of taking service under Ware. He spent most of the night in planning and first dawn found him wide awake.

"Get some fires started at once," he said to Sykes and Lee. "Then a couple of you get the extra cinch rings off the double cinches. We'll need all the iron we can get to make a quick job. Two of you drive ten head of cattle into the chutes."

It was simple enough but it took time. As each steer was penned in the six-foot chute a damp blanket was flung over him and the red-hot cinch-ring held in place over the big 'C' that marked Cincofuentes cattle rebranded it with an O that was finally amplified with a short bar before it, the O Bar brand! There was not much up-roar to it for after all it was merely hair-branding and hurt little if at all. It was slow work till Parsons found a sackfull of horse-shoes under some old sacks, and after that it was just a question of heating the irons and keeping a steady run of cattle to the chute. But it was dark when the last

steer was taken out of the chute.

"Thank goodness we've got water enough for them here tonight," Brent coughed over his tin-cup. "Thank Juan too for the extra coffee he made for us. We'll head across the Pass at daylight."

"Those brands'll pass muster if they don't look too close,"

"Men buyin' stolen cattle never look close at brands," said Brent. "We needn't worry yet. Hurry up and get 'em over the Pass."

High noon found them ready to take the trail.

"Lapwing's twenty miles," muttered Sykes. "That means a dry camp tonight again for us. You'll find alkali water for the cattle if them damned sheep haven't fouled it. Hard to hold 'em likely."

"Yes," Brent nodded, "but they'll be so tired they'll not stampede."

"We may have trouble on the trail," said Sykes, the pessimist. "Those four birds we turned loose may start somethin'."

"Not them. They were headin' for the Mexican line as straight as a crow flies. They saw Vinton hung," said Brent grimly. "That'll hold 'em for a while. Let's get started. Parsons, you and Norton ride 'point'. Burton and McGinn take right and left. The rest of you 'drag' with me. Keep 'em well closed up and move 'em right along."

That herd had not travelled far enough or fast enough to be footsore. They moved out in a compact mass and headed straight up the Pass. The gale had blown itself out during the night and the land lay hot and baking under the noon-day sun, and as they crossed the saddle Brent cast an appraising glance at the passing herd.

"Five hundred head," he said to Lee. "Vinton'd have to sell 'em cheap to make a quick sale and any one who gets those cows cheap 'll know they've been stolen. I wish I knew who was to receive them from Vinton."

He was to learn that a little later.

THEY dropped the Pass behind them and worked out into the flat land yellow with bunchgrass, dotted with prickly pear and the olive-green of the mesquite with wide stretches of purple sage that showed dark and glowing in the fading light. Brent looked over the wide expanse of the grazing lands and shook his head.

"No wonder Ware wants to work south of the Pass," he growled. "This is only twenty-acre land. [That means that it takes twenty acres to support one cow. Ed.] "But look at the low-lyin' scrub. It's a heaven for sheep if they have water. Look yonder!" He pointed to a gray smudge against a hill-side in the fore-ground. The next moment his pony snorted and leaped sideways as the wind brought to his delicate nose a sharp acrid smell punctuated by the 'baa, baa' of a multitude of sheep. "Those are sheep that Ware was to have ready to trample out all signs of the passing herd," said Brent quietly. He checked his pony, dropped his bridle hand and squinted into the sun-glare. He was trying to remember the exact words that Ware had used to Opp in the hotel room in San Simon. Driven sheep would be on hand to trample out all trail signs of passing cattle. That was it in effect. These sheep were too opportune to be an accident.

"Keep the herd moving," he called. "I'm going over to see those sheep. Lee, you'd better come with me."

Weeks and Sykes spread out a little and Brent and Lee headed across the windy level for the distant hill-side.

"There's more than just one bunch

there," Brent eyed the compact gray mass. He knew that sheep as a rule are run in bunches of about two thousand with perhaps a score of goats as a guard against wolves. He had had no experience in estimating numbers of sheep but he counted six men loafing under a brush and he knew that two men handle each flock. That meant six thousand sheep were here. They might not be Ware's sheep at all however.

As he rode up to the mesquite clump where the men sat they looked him over casually and muttered to each other. Then five of them went on with their game of cards and one rising slowly came toward Brent and Lee.

"Derned glad to see you," he said gruffly. "Been lookin' fer you sense yestiddy. You're Vinton, I reckon."

This was plain luck and Brent knew it. But even so he could not stoop to a flat lie.

"Vinton's back over the Pass yet," he said and waved a hand over his shoulder. "I brought the herd on. Got the sheep ready?"

"Yeah. Six thousand. They'll trample out any tracks you leave. I got this note for Vinton. I reckon I better give it to you." And he held out a dirty note sealed with a great blob of red sealing wax.

Brent took it, noted it had no address and ripped it open. A single sheet of cheap blue-lined note-paper bore a pencil scrawl that he deciphered with some difficulty. It read:

"Vinton:

Gilson has orders to drive six thousand sheep along your trail. You can trust him. He will follow you after you cross the Pass for ten miles on the Lapwing trail. Zinn will meet you in Lapwing and pay you ten dollars a head. Deposit it to my credit in the Lapwing and take a receipt for it in the Drovers Bank in Lapwing." It was signed with the initials 'G. W.'.

"That's the way Ware always signs his orders," said Gilson with a surly grin. "I reckon he figures on savin' ink that way."

"How many sheep has he got this side of the Pass?" asked Brent.

"Huh. You're askin' me! Mebbe sixty thousand but if he don't git a fresh range, he'll not have one come Spring. Me? I'm gittin' so damned tired o' the sight an' smell an' sound o' sheep I don't keer if I turned cannibal right now. You git your darned cows on ahead, Mister, an' I'll block your trail."

"What are you going to do?" asked Brent.

"See that 'ere saddle . . ?" Gilson pointed to the distant Pass . . . "That's the County Line. Once you cross that saddle even Opp, and he's the new sheriff over yonder can't touch you. I reckon Ware told you that. Opp can't touch you and Lynn over here won't want to. Hell man we all know Ware and Opp and Lynn and Eccles, too. You git on to Lapwing. You'll find Zinn waitin' fer you at the Central Hotel."

He turned away to his grinning companions and Brent, pocketing the note, turned away to his herd wondering.

This was a much wider plot than he had imagined. He wondered if every man in the county was in Ware's pay.

"Well?" asked Weeks tentatively as he rode up.

"They're Ware's sheep all right," said Brent. "Watch em."

They saw the men start the flocks with deftly thrown rocks and clods; they saw the goats driven into the advance and they watched the blatting flock as it huddled in a mass and then moved out over the cattle trail stopping to eat out every blade of grass

and every plant, as they worked slowly back toward the Pass.

"It's Lapwing for us now," said Brent. "It's not far now, but we'll have to make a dry camp tonight."

THAT meant every man would have to be on the *qui vive* and that their already tired ponies would have no rest. Sykes voiced his fears in a single growl.

"I only hope they don't stampede. Sometimes they form a habit of it. It don't take a hell of a lot to skeer 'em."

"I know," Brent grinned impatiently. "Last year down in the Baja country I saw three thousand head stampeded by one damned little grasshopper. It got up a cow's nose when we had 'em bedded down for the night. Phew! They were off in a second, and it took us three days to round 'em up again. I'll take first herd guard."

When he rode in to rest his tired pony he could hear Sykes who relieved him. His big voice boomed across the flats above the swish and sigh of the night wind as he announced to the wondering herd:

"Sam Bass he was a bold outlaw." and so on through twenty unprintable verses that even cows would have resented had they understood them.

First dawn, gray on horns and dew-wet hides, found them saddled up and before noon Norton on "point" waved from a distant ridge.

"That'll be Lapwing and I'm glad of it. Now what?" Brent glanced at a column of smoke that spoke of a railroad to their right front. "Keep 'em on the move. Don't let 'em stop. They'll lie down on you. They're right well tired out. They'll be stiff as boards come mornin'."

He had not been in Lapwing for six years but the place was unchanged, just a broken line of frame houses along a single track of railway, a big red water-tank and a set of cattle pens and loading chutes with a red-painted station. They drove the herd leisurely to the pens and Brent hailed a one-eyed man who was holding up a corner to the station.

"Seen Zinn around anywhere?" he asked.

"There he comes now," the man motioned Negro-fashion with his chin. "Must have got over his last night's drunk. They put him in a pen with a pig but the pig tore the side offen the pen an' got away from him. Zinn was sore about that. Said it was cold sleepin' that away. Here he is."

A scrawny sorrel pony limped around the corner and his rider hailed Brent casually:

"Where the hell is Vinton?" he asked. "I'm Zinn and I'm lookin' for Vinton.'

"He had some trouble back the other side of the Pass," said Brent coolly. "I brought the herd on for him. Here're the orders that Ware gave Vinton." And he held out the note that he had taken from Gilson.

Zinn snatched it and read and his face darkened; then he eyed the cattle that were being driven into the pens.

"That's good lookin' stuff," he growled. "But what the hell did Opp run his range brand on 'em for?"

"How would I know?" asked Brent. "I ain't paid by Ware to tell all I know. What did Opp tell you?"

"Opp never tells nobody nothin'," said Zinn. "That's why even Ware fights shy of him less'n he's got Opp in a strangle holt. Wait till I count the stuff. What'd you make it?"

BRENT told him and waited while Zinn made his own count. When it was completed Zinn climbed stiffly

from the top rail of the chute.

"Come on up to the hotel," he said. "We need a drink I reckon." But Brent shook his head. He had no mind to take a drink with any of this gang. It amounted to a principle with him.

"I'm on the water-wagon till I see Opp again," he said. "You just get me the cash for these cattle then I'll give you the herd."

"I'll not give you any receipt for them cattle," said Zinn positively. Brent grinned.

"Nobody asked you to," he said. "I want to deposit the cash to Opp's credit. That's what he said to do. At least," he amended; "that's what he'd like to have done. You just receipt to me for five hundred cattle of the O Bar brand. That clears me all right with Ware and Opp. Then I'll have the bank receipt for the money in case anything turns up."

Zinn grinned. "Maybe you'll not be headin' back to the San Simon valley," he said. "Me? I don't believe I would either. Lightnin' may strike there when Ware and Opp don't look fer it. I hear tell them cattle men are about ready to go on the prod about Ware's sheep."

"Ware means to hold all the water south of the Cataratas," said Brent casually.

"Yeah? Well it sure ain't my business. All I say is, he's sure as hell headin' for big trouble. Come on. I'll take you to the Drovers Bank and git the cash."

Zinn, with Brent at his heels, stormed into the dusty little bank, banged open a door marked "Private" and motioned Brent inside the room. A gray-eyed, ferret-faced little man whose head seemed to be made of flat surfaces set on edge glanced up and Brent noticed that at sight of Zinn his right hand went to his desk drawer. Then he grinned and withdrew it. Zinn came forward:

"This here is Joe Vinton, Mr. Eccles," he said. "He's brung that herd of Opp's across the Pass. You needn't worry none, Vinton," he said to Brent, "Eccles is a silent partner of Ware's. He's all right. While you talk with him, I'll git the cash. What I can't quite figure is why Opp went and slapped his own range brand on them cattle. . . . "

With that parting shot he hurried to the cashier's window, busied himself over a check, got the cash and came back with a pile of bills while Eccles, wondering at that last remark, turned to Brent.

"How much do you know of this transaction?" he asked curtly.

Brent laid the dirty note on the desk.

"I reckon that tells you all you've got to know," he said quietly. "Ware knows me. You'll just have to take me on trust and on Ware's letter here. I'm not goin' back there across the Pass to work for Ware. It's too dangerous. He's just achin' for trouble. I'm headin' south for the Line."

Eccles nodded. He understood. In times past he had himself seen occasions when that Line had been a haven of refuge but that had been before he had taken to banking under the protection of the laws of his country. He glanced up as Zinn came back and counted the money into Brent's hands.

"Give me a receipt for this," said Zinn.

Brent shook his head. "I'm leavin' at once," he said. "I've got all I want out of this deal with Ware and Opp. I'll deposit this cash to Opp's credit and send him the cashier's receipt for the money."

ECCLES'S eyes glinted curiously as Brent filled out duplicate deposit slips and passed them with the money

to the cashier. When the signed paper was returned to him he pocketed it and Eccles burst into speech.

"I'll be damned if I can figure this out," he said. "Why is that money deposited to the credit of Opp? We're all of us interested in it. Why is Opp's range brand on the cattle? Zinn says it is."

"Maybe it's because Opp took all the chances," said Brent.

"I'll damned soon find out about that. I'm not goin' to spend my time shavin' notes to keep Opp out of jail and then have him short change me like this. He's crooked and I told Ware he was crooked. Oh, I ain't blamin' you, Vinton. I don't know a think about you. I'll write Ware that you played the game accordin' to his rules but that I'm damned sure that man Opp is double crossin' him."

"Well," Brent's tone was almost judicial, "I wouldn't be surprised if you're partly right at that. You might tell Ware all about it."

"You can bank on my doin' just that." And Eccles seized a pen and paper and was deep in a letter before the door closed behind Zinn and Brent.

Brent found his men impatiently awaiting his return. At his nod they got to saddle and in ten minutes were heading back over the dusty trail toward the Pass and as they crossed the railroad tracks outside the town Sykes turned and spat vigorously.

"That's to git the taste of the damned place outen my mouth," he said. "How'd you pan out, Brent?"

"Better than I dared hope," said Brent with a chuckle. "I found out that Eccles, the bank president, is a partner of the man Ware. He is sure now that Opp branded the cattle with his own brand, O Bar, to let him short-circuit Eccles and Ware and Eccles'll tell Ware at once that he can't trust Opp; that Opp's got all the money that Ware planned to get for the stolen cattle."

"My God," said Sykes softly. "When I want to git myself into one hell of a mess of trouble I'll sure send for you to help mix it up fer me. What now?"

"Cincofuentes as fast as we can make it," said Brent. "I want to get hold of Ben Livesey as soon as I can."

CHAPTER VII

BONDAGE AND BONDS

BEN LIVESEY, grim of face and grimmer of demeanor, sat hunched up in his office at Cincofuentes listening to Brent's concise account of all that took place since he left the ranch. When Brent dropped into silence Ben got a bottle and glasses from a closet and thrust them across the desk.

"It looks like you sure have greased the skids under Ware," he said. "The only thing is, he's as tricky as a circus mule. Will he stay on the greased skids? Still I don't quite see what good it'll do in the long run."

"This will be a long fight," said Brent. "It isn't all over in one round. I have already made Eccles distrust Opp. Ware will, too, when Eccles tells him what he thinks is true of Opp. Eccles is Ware's partner and he expected to get a share of the price of that stolen herd. I know that."

"So do I know it," grunted Ben. "'Cause I happen to know Eccles. If as he says, he's got a lot of Opp's paper, Opp'll pay for it with his blood. Do you think that bunch that was with Vinton will make any trouble over what you done?"

"Not a bit," said Brent easily. "I don't care if they do. They'll never

come back to this valley. I'm bettin' on that. They can't know any man but me and I don't care."

"Well," Ben stirred uneasily. "What's next?"

"First thing in the mornin' I'm going over to see my father," said Brent quietly. "I ought to have done that first of all. I'll do it now. I must let him know what we're doing and that we're not taking all that Ware does lyin' down."

"Yeah. But most important of all you find out what old Sam did with them bonds that he had," said Livesey. "Don't forget that we need money to fight Ware. Don't you forget either that Ware is the legal authority to receive all money for this ranch. If he can find out where those bonds are, he'll impound them and in a week he'll own 'em. He's just as anxious as we are to find out about them bonds. He's made four searches already for 'em an' he's questioned me a couple of times. We can't get a dollar of Cincofuentes money to save the owner of Cincofuentes unless we steal it. Those bonds are as good as cash. I'll drive you in to San Simon at daylight. You kin ketch Number Two at seven o'clock and be in Dyer by noon."

San Simon was still only half-awake when Brent swung aboard Number Two west-bound but Dr. Nevins, abroad at First Drink Time, saw and recognized him. Number Two had not roared into the blackness of the Huisache tunnel when Nevins had Ware on the telephone.

"I thought you'd like to know," he said, "that young Halston just left on Number Two for Dyer. He bought a return ticket. The agent told me."

He heard Ware's grunt over the wire. Then:

"All right, Doc. Get Judge Lammert on the phone and tell him to come over to me at once."

Judge Lammert came at once. He knew that a message from Ware had better be obeyed quickly and pleasantly. Ware opened at once with all his artillery.

"Of course young Halston has gone to Dyer to see his father," he said. "You will get Dr. Hyde, the superintendent, at once and tell him that under no circumstances will young Halston be permitted to talk to his father without witnesses. Understand? Witnesses who will hear every word that is uttered. Have Dr. Close there for choice. I can trust Close in a way. My way! I wish to God I knew what that old devil did with those bonds he cached somewhere. If I can get those bonds he will not have a dollar with which to wage a war. He can't fight a suit over those springs without money. That's why I want to know about those bonds. I've just got to find 'em. Get that message at once to Hyde, Judge."

WITHIN a half hour Judge Lammert got Dr. Hyde on the wire and in very guarded words that would have meant nothing to a listener, told him what he himself had been told.

Now Dr. Hyde was an honest man. He had not long been the superintendent of the institution and his appointment was for eight years subject to reappointment. He owed his appointment to Judge Lammert and to Ware and he knew that removal would send him back to an unremunerative private practice in a land that had as many doctors as patients. He turned away from the telephone worried and a little angry.

"There is no doubt about that man Halston," he muttered. "He was examined by Doctor Nevins who lives in his own home town, by Doctor Storey

and Atwood. They can't all have made the same mistake. No one submitted a minority report. There is nothing for young Halston to build a suit on. Nothing! At any rate my proper course is clear. I am superintendent here and my job is to take adequate and proper care of the patients committed to my charge. I am not responsible for how they get here. Beyond that, if I can assist in any right and proper way the men who placed me here, so much the better. It means eight thousand a year, maybe for life if I handle things right."

That eight thousand dollars a year was the key to most of Ware's successes. So-much-a-year as long as the recipient obeyed his orders. But even yet Dr. Hyde was not entirely satisfied. To finally resolve his last doubt he sent for Dr. Close, an aged and somewhat infirm dyspeptic who had been for years at the asylum and could take only a jaundiced view of life. Like Lammert he had been on Ware's list for years against the time when his services might be useful. Close came in quietly and his questing gaze took in every detail without seeming to do so. Dr. Hyde turned to face him.

"How is that man Halston progressing, Doctor?" inquired the superintendent.

"Physically he seems well." Dr. Close sat back and reflectively tapped his prominent teeth with a pencil. "I have however observed in the history of these cases that an improvement in a patient's physical condition is not always accompanied by a corresponding improvement in his mental state."

"You mean . . ."

"That any improvement physically frequently accompanies a mental deterioration. As you probably know the man is undoubtedly a megalomaniac. He has false ideas of grandeur. He is obsessed with the notion that he is a man of very great importance. That he is wealthy and that he has influence that should serve him in every walk of life."

"I understand that he was, or is, a big ranch owner over in the San Simon Valley."

"He is a cranky, quarrelsome old man who always had his own way," said Close who had his cue from Ware and Lammert. "He was committed here on a court order after a careful examination made by reputable physicians."

"Has he talked freely to you?"

"Freely? Too freely. Every time I visit him he curses me so that it almost blisters me. He swears that he will get what he terms his revenge on you and me and Mr. Ware and on Judge Lammert who committed him here. Especially on Mr. Ware."

"That is frequently the case with men like him," said Dr. Hyde.

"And he says he has learned now what money can do."

"ONE moment," Dr. Hyde raised a hand, "his son is on his way here to see his father. Do you deem it advisable to allow him to see him?"

"By all means," said Close. "But I advise that I be present at the interview. It will afford me an opportunity to make an investigation as I can not do when he is undisturbed."

"Yes. That will be best. Judge Lammert telephoned me that young Halston is coming and recommended that, in case of doubt of the result of his visit to his father that an attendant be present during the visit. I will see Mr. Halston when he arrives."

"There comes a taxicab now," Dr. Close pointed out of the window to a cab coming up the drive-way. "That's probably Mr. Halston."

The next moment an attendant opened

the door and admitted Brent Halston.

"I have called to see the superintendent," he said and Dr. Close bowed toward Dr. Hyde. Brent got control of himself by an effort. Flushes of cold anger ran over him like snow above hot coals. How much of this legal tangle genuine. How much could be blown aside? How much was really legal and for how much was Ware accountable? One thing was sure, he must not allow himself to lose his temper. To do that would be playing into the hands of his father's enemies. These men were servants of the State but they were also in Ware's pay if his guess was correct.

"I am Mr. Halston," he said quietly. "I have come here to see my father who is one of your so-called patients."

"Have you a permit from Mr. Ware to see him?" asked Dr. Hyde. "You see, Mr. Halston, that is a necessary formality since Mr. Ware is his legal guardian. You have no such authority? Well, I will call Mr. Ware on the long distance phone and get it. All formalities must of course be observed."

In ten minutes he came back into the room smiling and waved Brent to a seat.

"Mr. Ware says that of course you can see him. I must caution you, sir, not to expect too much. For instance, your father has lucid intervals during which he believes himself to be the victim of a plot of some kind. Dr. Close, who will take you to him, will assure you that this is a very common delusion."

Brent paid scant attention to what Hyde said. He followed Close down a corridor to an elevator that took them up three floors, then along a hall on which certain caged doors opened and his heart sank. His father whom he loved dearly had come to this! This was the end of a life spent in the open, attending to his own business, winning the regard of the whole valley. He had fallen into a trap set by Ware and baited by Ware's tools. He suppressed a hot oath as an attendant unlocked a door and swung it open for them to enter the room.

For a moment the blaze of sunlight through an unshaded window dazzled him; then he saw a room comfortably furnished but with unbreakable iron furniture and on an iron cot under the barred window he saw a man lying. He had his arms across his eyes and he gave no sign of life as they entered the room. Dr. Close stepped forward.

"I want to see you, Halston," he said in a sharply authoritative tone. And at that tone and words Brent's anger rose to boiling point. He seized Dr. Close by the shoulder and whirled him about like a top.

"By God, sir," he said between his teeth, "to every man in San Simon Valley my father is *Mr.* Halston. To you, a ten-cent political appointee, he has fallen to a state where you call him as you'd call a Mexican peon! For a nickel I'd manhandle you." And he shook Close till his teeth rattled. Then he dropped him and Close sank into a chair.

BUT at that voice that he had not heard for five years, Sam Halston on the bed seemed to leap erect. He gave one disbelieving glance and almost leaped at Brent.

"Brent! Brent! Come home," he said. "By God, I've wished for you and now my wish has come true! Look at what they've done to me, son." He seized Brent in his arms as he had not done for years and his grim old face quivered. Brent drew him aside patting him on the arm.

"Now that I'm home we'll work all things out all right, Dad," he said.

"The main thing is that you must not worry and . . . wait."

"They say I'm crazy, son. I—I reckon I must have been for a bit."

"Ah . . ." Dr. Close, scribbling rapidly in a pocket note-book, nodded agreement.

"Yeah. I had two good chances to crack down on Gilbert Ware and Opp and I let 'em go," said the old man. "Any man must be a bit soft if he lets coyotes like them live when he can wipe them out."

Dr. Close glanced up sharply. "Mr. Halston," he said, "I warned you that your visit would probably cause some excitement and that it might react on the patient."

"Oh go to hell," said Brent hotly. "Get out of here and leave us alone. I want to talk privately with my father."

"That I fear is impossible, sir," said Close unctuously. "I am accountable for every effort being made to promote his recovery. I can see now that your mere presence aggravates the patient."

"By God!" Sam Halston sprang erect and half-reached for Close who slipped aside like an eel, "you're enough to drive me crazy for a fact with your sneakin', snoopin' ways, you mutton-faced coyote-bait." And Sam Halston reached out again but again Close slipped aside.

"Remember what happened the last time you tried violence," he said but his teeth chattered. "Straight-jacket and cold water if you try it again! All in kindness, my dear sir," he said frantically to Brent who was slowly moving toward him. "We can not permit even to our patients more than a certain degree of liberty and immunity from consequences."

"You refuse to leave the room?" asked Brent.

"I do. I am required by my duty to be present throughout this interview."

"Then, if you value your neck, get over in that corner and stay there," said Brent fiercely.

Under that stare as coldly murderous as the wolf-glare of the *lobo,* Close shivered a little. He feared he had gone too far, but he had his orders that he dared not disobey. He jerked a chair to the corner of the room and sat down watching while Brent, drawing his father to the cot, sat down by him and slipped an arm about old Sam's shaking shoulders. In a low tone that Close strove to catch but could not, he told him all that had occurred since his return and in his father's quiet nod he read complete approval. When he stopped talking his father gripped him strongly.

"Ware has laid his plans well," he muttered. "With Ware as so-called guardian and trustee for the ranch, you'll not be able to raise money to fight. And it'll need a lot of cash. . . ."

"I was coming to that," said Brent. "I have some money, not much. We may need more. What did you do with those bonds that you always kept on hand for an emergency? We may need them and if Ware ever finds out where they are he can legally impound them as a part of your estate."

"You're quite right. And Ware has tried every way he could think of to find out where they are. . . . You damned little *vinegaroon!*" he shouted at Close who was edging closer in an attempt to hear what was being said. Sam hurled a stool at him. "Keep to your own side of the corral or, by God, I'll brain you. . . ."

"White! Benson!" Close seized the iron-barred door and shook it frantically. "White, I say! Quick. The man is violent!"

"The bonds," said Brent curtly. "Quick! Where are they? Don't

you see the game? It's all a plant. The man was sent here to hear all you might say. He couldn't hear and he doesn't mean that I shall know about those bonds. The whole damned thing's a plant!"

"Plant?" Sam Halston's voice rose to a bull-roar as two burly guards rushed into the room and made for him. "Me, the richest man in San Simon Valley a patient here! Held like a roped steer! Me! Somebody'll pay for this damned outrage! Me who never rode less'n a thoroughbred! Me who eats off a silver plate and sleeps on a thirty thousand-dollar bed! Keep your damned hand off o' me," he shouted as the guards closed in on him.

Obviously afraid, the men hesitated and in that one little moment Sam Halston with the memory of a month's indignities to avenge, hit White. The blow caught him straight and full in the mouth and sent him to his knees on top of Close. They fell together but the other guard tripped Sam and fell on top of him as the two other guards hurried into the room. The next moment Brent found himself in the corridor with Dr. Close, scared and breathless and wiping a bleeding mouth by his side.

"I told you the man is dangerous," Close whined. "He gets that way whenever I come near him. I dreaded a private conversation for him."

"I . . . see. . . ." Brent looked him over apparently carelessly but with eyes that missed nothing. How much of this man was paid villain? How much was mere stupid compliance with orders? "I'm glad I came anyhow," he said enigmatically. "I see now how things stand."

"Yes. I'm glad too you came," said Close in curiously clipped tones. "You can not appreciate how very necessary is the very moderate restraint that we are compelled to impose. If at any future time I can be of any assistance—"

BUT Brent paid no attention to him. In fact he fairly brushed him aside and met Dr. Hyde at the elevator.

"What luck did you have, Mr. Halston? Did your father know you? Are you assured now of his condition?"

"Yes. He knew me and I am quite assured of his condition," said Brent quietly. "You have known Mr. Ware for some time haven't you?"

"Oh, yes. For some years. A fine, up-standing man, Mr. Halston. Your father's affairs are safe in his hands."

"Of course. One can sense that at once. I am sure that if and when my father is cured and released he will find that he has nothing to worry over."

Dr. Hyde puzzled at that. He was still puzzling as Brent called his waiting taxi and headed for the railroad. The moment that taxi was out of the institution grounds, Hyde called Close into his office and after a brief talk with him called Ware again on the long distance telephone.

"Young Halston was here, Mr. Ware, and saw his father," he said. "Nothing developed except that old Halston had a sudden outburst of fury just as he has had before, actual emotional insanity, and attacked Dr. Close. Yes! He had a moment's talk with his father but Dr. Close was always within a few feet. . . . Yes, Close heard all that was said. . . . Bonds? . . . You mean restrictions? . . . Oh . . . I see . Financial bonds? Of course . . . I understand that as guardian of the estate you will naturally be interested. Yes, you are quite right. Sometimes these patients develop the secretive qualities of a magpie. No! No mention was made of any bonds. I know that. Very

well. I quite understand. Good-bye. . . ."

Dr. Hyde pondered long over that talk. He did not like Ware's tone that was distinctly the tone of a man giving orders to an inferior but he resented it in only a modified way; the way a man resents an insult when he knows that the resentment may cost him eight thousand dollars a year.

"I wish to God," he muttered, "that I had political pull enough to land a Government job where I'd be fixed for life. I swear I'd like to know what's afoot in this matter. Ware does not get excited like that for nothing."

In fact Gilbert Ware realized at last that a fight of some kind was framing and was about to be staged. He knew the characters but he did not know their exits nor their entrances and he felt now that he had over-looked his own cues in some way. He was sure that Brent Halston's most inopportune arrival at Cincofuentes meant trouble but he could not guess what form that trouble would take. His first disturbing intelligence was in a long distance call from Eccles in Lapwing for Eccles could not wait for the tardy mails. His curt statement upset Ware completely.

"What the hell has broken over your way?" demanded Eccles. "Day before yesterday Opp's man Vinton came in here. He brought five hundred head of A-one cattle but he had Opp's range-brand on every one. He sold them to Zinn and deposited the cash."

"Yes! Yes! That's quite all right," said Ware easily.

"All right hell! So's hell all right if you like the place an' the society. I tell, you, Vinton deposited that cash to Opp's order. The cashier of course gave him a receipt. You can't touch that money with a ten-foot pole unless Opp gives it to you. He's double-crossed you as I always warned you he would. Good-bye."

WARE sat dazed for a moment. What did Eccles mean? Had Opp indeed dared to double-cross him? He could not believe it but he knew Opp and the one thing that every man is ready to believe of any other man is the worst! He sat up suddenly at the thunder of booted feet in the hall then the door crashed open and Opp of all men stood facing him.

"Hell's broke loose, Ware!" The man was past all coherency but he was cold sober. "Hell's broke loose I say!"

"I'll say it has," Ware rose and almost thrust his finger into Opp's bulging eye. "Eccles just called me from Lapwing. He says that your man Vinton brought those cattle in to Lapwing with his bunch of damned crooks. Every cow in that bunch was branded with your range brand, the O-Bar brand. Vinton sold them to Zinn and deposited the cash to your order. What the hell have you got to say to that?"

"What?" Opp drew an unopened letter from his pocket and stood staring at it with unseeing eyes till Ware seeing that it was postmarked "Lapwing," snatched it from him and ripped it open. The bank's receipt for the money deposited in cash to Opp's credit almost tore in his fingers. Opp eyed it and his eyes almost started from their sockets.

"You, you damned dirty crook," snarled Ware. "Vinton deposited that money to your credit. That's how you meant to double-cross me and Eccles. You'll pay for this and—"

"You're a liar," snarled Opp, "a damned mutton-headed, sheep-stealin' liar. *Vinton's dead!*"

Ware backed away from him as from a crazy man and Opp went on:

"I just learned it from Jim Staley.

Staley rode in from his homestead. He'd been prospectin' up in the Alturas and he come to town by the Coyote Cut trail. He says that he seen a body hangin' to a tree over this side of Windy Pass. He rode over to see what it was and he seen it was Vinton."

"Good God, man! What's this? You say the man was *hung?*"

"That's what Staley said. Staley wasn't sorry a bit over it. He sort o' said it was the pleasantest sight he'd seen fer years. In fact he said more'n that. He was a li'l bit drunk when I seen him. He said the on'y improvement he could suggest would be to hang you on one side o' Vinton an' me on the other. Honest to God, Ware, I don't know a thing about that money nor the cattle either. I never put my brand on ary head o' that stock. Vinton wouldn't have done it without bein' told to . . . Who could have hung Vinton? You reckon young Halston could have got a gang together an' have done it?"

"No," Ware shook his head and his eyes showed anxiety. "Young Halston's been over at Dyer seein' his father. If you don't know anything about that money in the bank at Lapwing, you'd better transfer it to me and I'll make the division."

But Opp shook his head decidedly at that. "It might be somebody I forgot who owes me money," he said coyly. "Let's wait to divide till we know more about it. What did Eccles say?"

"Just what I told you. He was hotter than hell, too. He said he's entitled to a twenty-five per cent cut of that money."

"Yes, damn him, an' he's got a lot o' my paper, too," said Opp. "I wish I could figure out that mess about Vinton. I'll have to find out somewhere how it happened. I can't go huntin' the matter up myself though. That'd queer me too much. I'd like to know what that young Halston's up to," he added.

NEITHER he nor Ware would have been relieved had they seen Brent Halston.

A horse borrowed from the bartender at the hotel took him out to Cincofuentes in almost record time and Ben Livesey met him with a leonine roar of welcome.

"Well, he demanded, "what luck?"

Brent told him succinctly but clearly.

"I think Hyde, the superintendent, is trying to play both ends against the middle," he said. "But superficially he's honest. I doubt if he more than suspects what's wrong. That man Dr. Close is different. I didn't have a chance to have a confidential talk with Dad. Close kept almost in my pocket. I figure that he had his orders not to let me see Dad in private. Then to make matters worse, Dad's lost his temper. He cursed Close and beat him up with a stool. He sure did curse him."

"What'd he say," queried Mr. Livesey interestedly. "When old Sam gits started he's got a gift o' tongues like they had in the Bible. What'd he say?"

"Say! He shouted out to Close that before he was done he, Close, would find out what it meant to fight with the biggest and richest man in the Valley. He yelled out that he was the wealthiest man in all the Valley; that he eat his meals off a silver plate and that he sleeps every night on a thirty thousand dollar bed."

"Whoa! Back up," shouted Mr. Livesey. "The plates old Sam eats offen are rubber. At least his upper one is. An' the bed— Where the hell are you goin'?" he demanded quickly of Brent who had risen and was heading for the door.

"His room, Ben," said Brent quickly. "I didn't see it till now. I've got it at last. His bedroom! Quick man! Don't you see? He knew Close would tell Ware whatever he might learn from our talk and he chose that way to tell me where those bonds are hidden. Those bonds are in his mattress!"

With old Ben Livesey hard at his heels Brent entered his father's bedroom. He wasted no time on preliminaries but dived straight at an iron cot, snatched the flock mattress from it and running his knife down the main seam ripped it open and thrust his hands deep into it.

At first his eyes registered disappointment, then a curious look dawned in them; then he snatched his hand free and held out to Ben a stiff manila envelope filled with stiff crackling papers. He tore them from the envelope, took one look at them and fairly flung them at old Ben.

"The bonds at last," he said gently. "Be careful, Ben. Take 'em and hide 'em. If Ware finds out we have them, he'll try to get them. They're our war-chest now. Without them we couldn't fight but now . . . Watch our smoke."

CHAPTER VIII

THE WATER-HOLE

BRENT was worried and perplexed at old Ben's attitude. He seemed to have developed an inferiority complex over-night. Until Brent told him the talk that he had overheard between Ware and Opp, Ben had suspected much but could prove nothing. The legal steps that had incarcerated Sam Halston had been so formal, so technically correct, that the old foreman did not quite know what steps to take. Now he turned to Brent for instructions. Ben could handle all the troubles of a great ranch so long as legal battles were not involved; these crooks entrenched behind a legal barrier appalled him.

"The Springs and the Wiltons are the first things to be seen to," said Brent over his coffee. "Give me a horse and let me alone. I'll ride over there at once."

"I better go along," said Ben. "Pack your gun if you see Wilton."

"No. I don't want you and I don't need any gun. There's not goin' to be any row. I'll be back for dinner."

He stepped aboard a plunging roan that Lee brought and the bunk house watched. They saw the roan whirl and buck and spread his four legs at impossible angles; then a swirl of red dust spiralled above horse and rider. Two minutes later Brent rode out of that dust-wreath, the roan contentedly chuckling his bit and nodding his head in perfect satisfaction. He had had his morning fling and he was happy.

Smoke was swirling up from the chimney of the Benn house where Mrs. Gordon lived with her daughter as he passed but he did not stop. He would meet the Gordons later. His first goal was The Springs.

Far over on the extreme Eastern edge of Cincofuentes five great springs gushed out of the hill-side and gave Cincofuentes its name. There five flows united in a great pond that was overshadowed by giant cotton-woods and silver maples that stood knee-deep in the brown water and the marshes were dark with rankly growing water-cress. Brent had once built a canvas canoe on that pond and had taken many a fish from its dark pools. In those days he had been pirate, buccaneer and even Francis Drake on his voyage around the world. A long drift fence led down

to the Springs. Brent saw that the wire was cut.

He frowned, dismounted, re-set a post and rode on till suddenly the roan flung up his head and squealed shrilly. A sour, heavy, evil-smelling scent was in the air. Brent knew it at once. A fox can not with-hold his scent; a skunk can not disguise his presence; a sheep carries his own calling card. This was . . . *sheep!*

The roan plunged forward in a series of half-leaps that took him to the top of a low ridge and Brent looked down into the hollow below him where Five Springs lay dark and still under its trees. The pond was a quarter-mile across and its edges were rank with sword-grass and cat-tails with elder brush and water-willow. The wide shallows were over-laid with great lily pads and in those shallows, standing belly-deep, mingling their stench with the smell of trampled mud and dying vegetation, stood sheep . . .! sheep . . .! sheep! The Springs were jammed with a great herd. Five hundred sheep milled about uncertainly in the shallow waters, watering as sheep do, standing belly-deep. The surface of the pool was covered with the oil from their fleece, a thin, dim, iridescent coating of oil that was beautiful in the sun-light. Red and yellow and orange; all the colors of the spectrum were there. That oil is anathema to cattle, they will die rather than drink that tainted water.

TWO hard-bitten sheep-herders, shaking dice on a blanket spread under a mesquite bush, glanced up as the roan topped the ridge and, seeing Brent, one of them raised his voice in a shout.

"Hey, Mr. Wilton," he shouted. "Better come up here. Here's a stranger."

At that shout a big man rose from under a bush. His shoulders were those of a Hercules and his hands hung almost to his knees. Brent was suddenly aware of a huge hay-colored beard, of eyes as hard and cold as blue ice; then a big voice boomed out at him.

"What the hell do you mean stranger, ridin' in on my sheep?" The very appearance of the man spelled trouble. Brent eyed him wordlessly. So this was Wilton! This was the man who had started the lying suit about those Springs at Ware's behest. This was Wilton and he knew that Wilton was the small end of the wedge that Ware and Opp meant to drive home.

"Damn your sheep," said Brent sharply. "I'm Halston. I give you five minutes to get your sheep off my water. After five minutes I begin—"

"Huh. Maybe you'll begin on me then. I got one crazy Halston locked up fer monkeyin' with me. I reckon he ain't the craziest." He snatched at his waist but his hand never reached his gun.

Brent's right hand dropped low and to the right. His years in California Baja had taught him much. Men say that the *vaqueros* of California Baja can rope a humming-bird without ruffling a feather and Brent, in five years, had learned from the best. That tiny loop, small for brush-roping, left the saddle pommel like a small spread spring opening wide. It dropped over Wilton's head and shoulders. Then the trained roan daintily side-stepped to take up the strain. The result was cataclysmic.

Wilton stood like a man suddenly petrified. His hands worked spasmodically but he could not raise them for that raw-hide riata held his arms to his sides like a steel-band. He knew too that if he moved, the perfectly trained horse would take up every inch of

slack and he would be dragged. His only hope was to stand perfectly still. Brent eyed him coolly through a swirl of cigarette smoke.

"Let me know when you feel like havin' a polite talk," he said. A burst of vitriolic profanity answered him. "Oh, now! Don't talk like that. You ought to wash your mouth out after that. Come to think of it," he said grimly. "I believe I'll wash it for you."

He started the roan toward the pond at a slow trot. Wilton dug in his heels and hung back but inch by inch his stride unwillingly lengthened till he was running at full speed. He had to run or be dragged for his arms were fast bound. Twice he fell. The roan stopped instantly but the riata never slackened.

"Hey . . . ! You . . . ! For God's sake!" Wilton managed to gasp. "Let up . . .! I've had enough!"

"All right. I was only waitin' for you to say so! Hold him, pony!"

Brent swung out of saddle and the rope-wise pony swung aside but did not ease off the pull as Brent walked up to his victim, took the six-gun from the holster and threw it into the pond where it fell with a mighty splash.

"I'm pullin' your fangs first," he said pleasantly. "Now just one word Mr. Wilton. I'm Halston of Cincofuentes and I've come back here to live. I'm giving you fair warning, Wilton. You've watered your sheep in Five Springs for the last time. Call those men of yours and give 'em orders to get the pests out of the water. If you refuse, I'll drag you over to Cincofuentes afoot and that's eight miles! Talk quick!"

THE two gaping sheep-herders, aghast at what they saw, could not believe their own ears when Wilton gasped out broken orders to get the sheep out of the water. It was a long half-hour before the pool was clear of them.

"Now tell 'em to re-string that wire they cut," said Brent.

They did it!

"Now tell 'em, in my hearing, that never again are they to bring any sheep across Cincofuentes wire. You'd better talk damned quick! This pony is just honin' for a trot. You'll look nice on the hondo end of a riata." He touched the pony with his hand. The roan dropped his head and moved off whinnying, his eyes on the straining riata. Wilton took three long, running steps and experienced a sudden change of heart. He breathlessly gave the order.

"Right," said Brent. "That's what I call bein' nice and friendly. Now you listen to me." His voice changed to a fierce undertone that could not be misunderstood. "You haven't got an old man to deal with this time. Where I came from, for half of what you've done, you'd have been dragged to death at the end of a rope. It may happen yet. Take warnin'. If one single sheep comes on Cincofuentes water, I'll hold you personally responsible. Now get out."

He swung into saddle, picked up the roan with rein and spur and leaped him straight at Wilton who fell over backward to avoid the rush. The next moment there was a whir and a snap and the loop of the riata flicked loose and Wilton stood free.

"Get out," said Brent. "Before I change my mind."

But in that quick glance that Wilton gave, he saw that his tormentor carried no gun. He backed against a tree where he could not be roped and for ten minutes spoke without ever repeating himself. Brent listened grinning.

"That comes from associatin' with

sheep," he said. "Mind what I tell you about keepin' your stock off Cincofuentes land and water." He whirled the roan and, while Wilton stood cursing steadily, the pony topped the divide and was gone.

Brent knew he faced big trouble. He knew that the Wiltons would never have dared do what they had done unless they had Ware's backing and he knew now, from Ware's own lips, that court and sheriff were mere creatures of this shrewd crooked politician who had made a million off crooked roulette games and who coveted more. Ware and Opp must be shown up to the world and the best way to do that was to start on Wilton. If he could once show that Wilton was a tool of Ware he would have the community with him. He must 'smoke' Ware out into the open.

God how he loved this range! Mile after mile of it lifted in the amethystine air. Yellow bunch grass, miles of it, checkered with the olive-green shadows of the mesquite clumps and, blocking the far horizon, the Cataratas fringing the sky-line with their crests of everlasting snow. It was a man's country! A canvas and raw-hide land! And he swore a solemn oath, as he rode, that Ware nor Opp nor any other crook should drive him and his father away from the place they loved. A mile, two miles, three and four miles of swale on swale dropped away behind him as he headed back for Cincofuentes. The roan whinnied sharply and his ears pricked forward as a voice came to them on the hot wind: a woman's voice, full but ringing, with the curious lilting note in it that reminds one of bells ringing over water.

"Move off I tell you! Take your hand away or I'll use my *romal* . . ." Oh you—"

Then the roan topped the ridge and Brent saw red for the second time that day.

A pony tied to a bush slumped in the heat and was being nosed by another horse. A small portable easel and stool stood in the shadow of a mesquite clump. He noticed those only subconsciously. His eyes were caught and held by a tall girl, a nimbus of fair hair about her eyes; a slender figure in riding clothes and a hand up-raised to strike.

THEN he saw the man! The very counterpart of Wilton only twenty years younger, a flushed face bearded with youth's unkempt beard, eyes alight with unrestrained passion. His back was to Brent and the wind deadened the hoof-beats of the roan.

With a muttered oath Brent lifted the roan with heel and rein and hurled him a living thunder-bolt at the man. He went down in a cloud of dust and when that dust settled the girl was standing staring at them from startled eyes and Brent stood squarely over the prostrate man.

"You're name's Wilton of course," said Brent laconically. "The family seems to run true to form." He turned to the girl as Jeff Wilton scrambled to his feet. "You're Miss Gordon, I suppose. Ben Livesey told me of you. I'm Brent Halston and I've just come home to Cincofuentes after five years of Lower California. It seems to be about time I was comin' home. Sorry to meet you like this, Miss Gordon, but one can't always choose. Steady Wilton," he cautioned suddenly. "Don't go for your gun. If I'd wanted to kill you, I'd have done it long ago."

But Jeff Wilton did try to go for his gun. Where he had learned that fumbling "draw" was a puzzle. While his hand still strove to pull the gun from its holster, he was struck a second

time by a living avalanche, the gun was torn from his grip and hurled far into the thicket and he found himself, his back to his foe, held fast in a grip that he could not break.

"Don't hit him, Mr. Halston! I beg you! Please!" The girl laid a light hand on Brent's arm. "You've done enough. The man is just a loutish, ignorant—"

"I know. They never had his like in my time here. I'm not goin' to hit him, Miss Gordon. I never hit an unarmed man. But there's no valid reason why I shouldn't shake him."

Left to himself Jeff Wilton would have chosen a beating. Brent stood six feet with a hundred and sixty pounds behind it. For five years he had roped and ridden and punched cattle from Puntas de Perlas to Cabo San Roque and men do not grow soft in California Baja. If they do, they die.

For a brief five minutes Jeff Wilton thought a miniature earth-quake had got him and was romping all over him. He leaped like an Alpine chamois. His watch flew from his pocket and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets. He tried to yell but that shout was stifled half-way out. He shook and jumped and quivered and revolved about a fixed center that was Brent Halston who, with teeth set and iron muscles, shook and shook. Finally he let go all holds suddenly and Jeff Wilton, like a shot from a gun, dropped under the nose of the astonished pony.

"You can go now," said Brent.

Wilton slunk off to his pony. He never even thought of retrieving his lost gun. His only thought was to get away. He climbed into saddle and from that vantage point turned on his tormentor.

"You're Halston huh? By God, you'll pay for this," he snarled.

"It's been worth a good price," said Brent. "You're on Cincofuentes land. Get this! I'm givin' you one and only one warnin' right now. It stands for you and your father too. If either of you set foot on this ranch from now on, you'll take the consequences. Keep off o' Cincofuentes. I aim to clear the land of vermin."

Wilton turned his horse and headed up the slope riding slowly as if the tardiness was an excuse for his late humiliation. When the pony disappeared over the ridge, Brent turned to the girl.

"I'm sorry he annoyed you," he said. "We can't always head off people like that. I assure you Cincofuentes will try to look after the welfare of its tenants better in future."

ETHEL GORDON was taken aback. In her year and a half of life in the little Benn house on Cincofuentes where she and her mother had come in search for local color she had never met a man like this. The men at Cincofuentes, always courteous, made her feel a certain aloofness. She felt that they felt apart from her. She suddenly realized that this man was different. His very smile was one of certainty. Here was a man who gazed tolerantly on the world, so long as the world lived by his code. Something told her that that code was a man's code and that in his mind, if the world did not choose to live by his code the world could go to hell! She could not know that Brent Halston, as manager of that great Trevizos rancho in California Baja, had met on equal terms men whose names were pass-words to European courts. As Manager of that big Trevizos estate, Brent Halston was virtually a Secretary of the Interior of Lower California. He was a power in the land. And he was twenty-six!

"I—I—" she began breathlessly.

"Has he annoyed you before this?"

"Oh he's turned up occasionally when I've been sketching but he never was a menace till today."

"It'll never occur again," said Brent. "I've given him warning and I'm not the most patient person in the world. Let me take the easel."

The roan pony was a gentleman. He made no objection to the three-legged easel across the cantle and they headed across the flat toward Cincofuentes.

From time to time Ethel half-turned to look at this new type of man whom she had met for the first time. Already she was prejudiced in favor of any one named Halston.

"You have no idea how kind your father has been to us," she said, breathlessly. "I . . . We . . . have heard a great deal, Mr. Halston. This entire affair is simply damnable."

"I feel it's a good thing that I came home," he said soberly. "I didn't get here an hour too soon. I fear things are worse than I imagined. There's been a lot of crooked work . . . Let that wait . . . Shall we gallop here?"

The horses stretched out neck-and-neck and they raced across the flat to the low thunder of the hoof-beats and the light click-click of the shifting bits.

"Oh, that was glorious . . ." Ethel flung a strand of red-gold hair from her eyes and he saw now that those eyes were blue-gray with tiny hazel sparks in them. She colored under his eyes and edged her pony to the side of the trail.

"Here we are at the house," she said. "And there's my mother waiting for me."

Mrs. Gordon, a tiny wisp of a woman with prematurely gray hair, met them unsmilingly but at mention of Brent's name her face lit.

"You'll come to us when you can and care to," she said with a swift, warm hand-shake. "Your father's son is always welcome."

Livesey was waiting at the corral and his face was grim. When Brent told him of his row with the Wiltons that face became grimmer.

"You sure haven't helped matters none, Son," he said. "Somethin's got to be done of course. I've sent word to Flores and Peters and old Pop James and Ewing to come over here tomorrow for a pow-wow. While you was gone a paper came."

"For me?"

"No. It was addressed to me as manager of the Cincofuentes ranch. They ain't recognizin' you as havin' any legal status here. The paper's a note from Ware. Of course he's writin' as the legally appointed guardian of old Sam. He encloses a copy of the injunction that that damn Judge Lammert handed down tellin' us that we can't wire Five Springs."

"Lammert's away," said Brent. "Ware told me so."

"THEN he's come back. They've forbidden us to wire Five Springs against sheep till the court decides the case that Wilton has brung up." If we own Five Springs we can later wire the Springs. If we lose the suit, Wilton can water his damned sheep where he chooses and Ware can hustle fifty thousand head across the Cataratas. The whole damned valley'll be sheep country. That's why I sent for those men to come."

"I see . . . ! Keep those men here till I get back, Ben. I'm goin' in to San Simon to get a lawyer. Who'd I better see?"

"Lessin," said Ben. "Ware tried to git him disbarred last term o' court. Said he took too much red liquor. Judge Evans was sittin' fer Lammert who was drunk that day. Evans says that

he'd like to know the kind o' liquor old Lessin uses. Said the whole bench and bar'd be the better of it. Ever since Joe was weaned he's studied law like a wolf studies a trap, tryin' to find how to keep out of it. He never takes a case into court. He says anybody who goes to court is a damned fool. You see Lessin. Beside that he'd give six-bits to git his knife into Ware's hide. I hope he's sober."

JOSEPH LESSIN, Attorney at Law, was as sober as even Ben Livesey could wish as Brent's roan pony clattered up to his door. That office was a welter of papers and dust and cob-webs that were beaded with dust but somehow it conveyed an impression that things were done there. Lessin himself sat slouched in a chair. His ample paunch was covered with tobacco droppings from his cigarettes and his shrewd eyes peered at Brent from under eye-brows as white as cotton.

"You needn't tell me your name." He sprang to his feet and thrust out a leathery hand. "You're Sam Halston's boy. Bound in calf."

"Not sheep-skin anyhow, Mr. Lessin. I've come to see you, Sir, because I need a lawyer and I want the best." The old man's eyes twinkled at that.

"Sit down," he said and thrust a chair forward with a touch of his foot. "Now talk."

Brent started with his leaving Cincofuentes five years before and in his vigorously told Odyssey he gave every detail of what had happened till this moment of his arrival at Lessin's office. When he stopped, Lessin let go a great sigh.

"By God," he said, "You've got a gift of brief narrative. I have suspected much of what you've told me but I could never have proved it. We can't prove it right now. We've got to get the evidence. I'll take your case for two reasons. First I want to help old Sam; secondly I want to get my knife under Ware's hide."

"Huh. Love and hate. The two best reasons in the world," said Brent. "What's first to be done?"

"I'll see Judge Lammert," said Lessin. "It will not do any good, though. We'll file an application to have Ware discharged as your father's guardian and to have you appointed. They will not do it of course. Lammert wears Ware's brand. But that's our first step. Secondly," He ticked off the points carefully: "We want to identify the man Opp killed in the bar-room the other day and, if we can, get Opp in trouble. It may not count for much but smoke makes the eyes red and Opp and Ware see through the same glasses. What do you remember about the man?"

"Only the tattoo marks on his arms," said Brent. "On one arm the initials J. W. were tattoed with the legend 'U.S.S.Daphne.' On the other was a girl's name, Elena with the word OHIO."

"Huh. I see. Maybe the State authorities back in Ohio," began Lessin but Brent cut him short:

"No. No. You're barkin' at a knot. That's Japanese tattooin'. I've seen 'em in Lower California, you know. That word OHIO is not the name of the state. It's a Jap word that means 'by your leave' or 'damn your soul' or some other politeness. It looks to me as though the man Opp killed was a man whose name began with J. W. He'd been in the Navy on the ship Daphne and while he was in Japan he had a girl's face and name tattooed on his arm."

Lessin fairly jumped. "That's easy to settle," he said. "I'll write to our Representative in Congress at once

and ask him to get me copies of the crew list of the Daphne for the last tour of Chinese service. We're gettin' hot, boy. We'll land Opp yet for a murder and we'll make Ware come out into the open to defend him. All I've got to say to you is: Keep a shut mouth and a loose holster. Bye."

CHAPTER IX

THE WARNING

BRENT, heading for the hotel bar, was stopped by a loud hail in the corridor and turned to face Ware. The big man looked less kindly than when Brent first saw him. His greeting was a trifle less genial but his outstretched hand was just as flabby and his grip was just as hard.

"You're the man of all others I want to see," he said. "Come into the office a minute."

He led the way into the office, thrust the clerk out of the room, and turned almost fiercely on Brent.

"You have simply raised hell," he said. "Here am I, your father's legal guardian, doing my level best to square things to set old Sam right with the world and you go and spoil the whole thing."

"What in the world are you driving at?" demanded Brent in honest astonishment.

"Wilton came in to town today," said Ware. "He had his son with him and they swore out a couple of warrants for your arrest. I believe the technical charge is assault and battery. What in the world have you been doing to antagonize the Wilton's?"

"I found Wilton watering his sheep on Cincofuentes," said Brent. "He and his men had cut the wires. I ordered him off. Then we mixed it up and he got the worst of it. I gave him warning. Then when I was on the way home, I found young Wilton making himself very objectionable to a girl. I don't know why I should take the trouble to explain all this to you. It's none of your business. How're you mixed up in it?"

"Only through a desire to see justice done and peace maintained," said Ware smoothly. "You apparently do not understand at all. Judge Lammert has told Mr. Livesey that he can not keep sheep off those Five Springs till and if the courts confirm his title, I mean our title. It bothers me more than a little. And you are making things even more difficult for me, young man. You may not know it but Opp and Wilton are half-brothers. You had a row with Opp. Opp holds your father's note for thirty thousand dollars. You have very successfully antagonized them both. Opp came to see me. He means to sue out the note unless I can manage to placate him and arrange to have him take over the ranch in full satisfaction of the note."

"I don't quite understand." Brent felt that the ground was being cut from under his feet. "Explain please."

"I will. Wait till we have a drink."

When that drink had been ordered and drunk, Ware went on:

"It's simply too bad about this matter. I tried to placate both men but you have antagonized them and I doubt if I can succeed. They each swear vengeance against you and the worst of it is that they'll take it out on your old father who can't help himself. No interest has ever been paid on the note that Opp holds. It's long past due. If he sues on that note, he'll get judgment. That means they will levy on any property that your father has. He only owns the ranch. That means that Cincofuentes will be ordered sold at auction to satisfy the note. Ten years ago it was worth five times that sum.

You couldn't get a tenth of that amount for it today, especially since Wilton has entered suit about the Springs. It is far better if I can induce Opp to do it to get him to take the ranch over in full satisfaction for the note."

"Good God!" Brent was frankly appalled. Things were moving too rapidly for him. "You mean that almost any day now my father may lose his home ranch? And this under guise of law?"

"I fear there is little question of that. Now about this matter of the Wiltons and the warrants they swore out. I am afraid your life in Lower California did not help you any for a life of law and order. You seem to have embroiled yourself very thoroughly in the short time since your return. You've already got two warrants out for your arrest and, if I understand correctly, you have defied the law by wiring Five Springs after Judge Lammert enjoined the ranch from doing it. Really if I were you, I'd just get my horse and ride away and leave the Wiltons looking for you."

"LIKE hell I will," said Brent hotly. "I gave the fool fair warning. He was on my land."

"Just one moment," Ware held up a detaining hand. "Let's understand each other. Just what do you mean by 'my land'?"

"My father's land of course," Brent blazed. "Cincofuentes of course. Are you a damned fool, Mr. Ware?"

"If I am I never took a degree," grinned Ware. "But your father's land and your land are two separate and distinct things. To come down to cold legal facts. What legal right had you to order Wilton off Cincofuentes? I ask you in all friendliness. I'd just like to get your mental attitude. What right had you to order him off?"

"It's my father's land," said Brent hotly.

"Correct. But you are over twenty-one. Your father is incarcerated after due process of law as being unfit to attend to his own affairs. That land of Cincofuentes can only pass to you by deed or will. If your father ever made deed or will previous to his losing his mind, I have never heard of it. I am his guardian. I and I only, beside Mr. Livesey, can order people off Cincofuentes. Forgive me for this Mr. Halston but it is best to be plain, even brutally plain. You have no more right to give orders about Cincofuentes than to give orders about my property. You are in fact a rank trespasser on my good nature."

Then Brent Halston hit him!

It was more than human nature could endure. He had done his best and, with the patience learned in months of lonely night-herding on the wide plains of California Baja, he had kept his temper till now. He had, even now, hidden his cards and Ware did not suspect how much he knew. But now he had reached the limit.

Ware went down in a bleeding heap. His head hit the door-post and a stream of blood trickled down over his collar. Carr, the proprietor, leaped to aid him but Brent thrust him aside.

"Let him alone," he said. "I want to hear what he says when he gets up. I've seen even a thief tell the truth when he gets it like that. He may tell the truth but I doubt it."

Ware raised himself on both hands. His glasses were knocked off, his nose cut, his mouth bleeding. He rose ponderously to his feet and blinked at Brent who was trying to shake loose Carr and the bar-tender who were clinging to him.

"By God . . ." Ware's voice gathered volume and steadied. "That's the worst

blow you ever struck in your life, Halston! You've hit your father! You'll remember that later, when you're in hell. You'll remember too it was I who put you there."

He walked into the hotel with an assumed dignity that was not supported by his cut lip and bleeding nose and Brent, taking his pony from the tie-rack, headed back for Cincofuentes. Half-way down San Simon's main street, Lessin hailed him and leaned forward from the side-walk as Brent reined up to the curb.

"I got Judge Lammert," he said. "It was just as we knew it would be. He was mighty polite till he found out what I wanted. The minute I told him we wanted Ware relieved as your father's guardian and you appointed he began to hem and haw. Said that Mr. Ware is a business man of proven ability and you are a kid still. You know the line of talk. He refuses to lend his support to such an appeal."

"HOW about trial before another judge?" asked Brent.

"We can't get past Lammert," said Lessin. "A writ of habeas corpus would come up in Lammert's own court. No use wastin' time there. We've got to think up something else. . . . Wait a bit!" He jerked a hand at the younger Wilton who was herding a group of men up the street. "Those men are strangers here. Look! Wilton is takin' them into the bar. Why would Wilton be buyin' drinks for strangers? I guess right. I guess Opp and Wilton are in on this deal. They've brought those men to San Simon. I'll look the matter up and have more to tell you in a day or two. Go on home, boy. You've started hell enough for a while. But I'd give six-bits of anybody's money to have had a crack at Ware like you did."

He stood watching the departing dust-cloud that followed the roan till it passed out of San Simon and then he walked slowly back to his house.

Back at Cincofuentes Ben Livesey waited impatiently for Brent's return. The notes that he had sent to his friends had been answered and five big men sat about the wide porch. If they had any inkling of the reason for their gathering they gave no sign. They lived and worked mostly in silence and more than once each of those five men had faced a violent death in support of the law of the White Man. What could be the trouble now? Finally when the silence became oppressive Ewing, of the Square J, exploded.

"I don't know what you want of us Ben," he said. "But I've about reached my limit. I lost two hundred head of two year old stuff last month."

"Where'd it go?" asked Peters.

"How in hell do I know where they went? All I know is we trailed 'em into the Cataratas and kept on the trail till it was trampled out by about five thousand of them damned sheep."

"I heard say that Ware bought the Blunt claims last month," said Lunt impersonally. They all laughed.

"You fellows listen to me," Livesey got the floor. "Five years ago, Gilbert Ware was cashier in a crooked gamblin' hall in Rawhide. Now look at him! He runs fifty thousand head o' sheep the other side of the Cataratas."

"Oh. Sheep," said Peters sniffing.

"Yeah. I said sheep. It's one thing fer us to throw off on sheep. We was raised to cattle. But don't forget that sheep make money. You buy a yearlin' for two dollars, turn her loose on the free range and in a year you've got two sheep and the wool. A hundred per cent and plus fer profit. Do that fifty thousand times in a year and take count o' stock."

"That's all right," said Peters grim-

ly. "Some women make money at the Oldest Trade in the World but I'd sort o' hate to see my women folk undertakin' it!"

"Anyhow you all listen to me. You know what Gil Ware has put over on old Sam Halston. You know where Sam is now. That or worse will happen to the man who bucks Ware unless he's busted higher'n Gilderoy's Kite," said Livesey passing bottle and glasses on a tray. "I tell you one thing right now," he said. "Right or wrong, law or no law, I stand by Brent Halston in this matter. He's fightin' for two things, to get his old man a square deal and to keep this here land a cattle country. If you fellows won't fight now when you kin all stand together, you'll have to do it later when Gil Ware'll git you one by one. Here comes Brent."

A whirl of dust came down the road, stopped at the gate and from the heart of that dust-cloud, with a little musical of great Mexican spurs, stepped Brent Halston. Most of those men knew him but they had not seen him since he was an unformed boy. Five years of unquestioned authority give weight and age. He eyed them in silence as he stood by his horse, the shimmering dust settling about his head, his eyes alight.

"By God," said big Phil Reed explosively. "That man'll charge hell with a dipper o' water."

"Here's the water," Livesey hurried forward with bottle and glasses. "What happened, Brent?"

"A whole lot. I'll tell you as soon as I wash the dust from my throat. Let someone take my horse, Ben."

The big men waited. The silence of the hills was on them. This man, young though he was, was one of them by blood and up-bringing, by tradition and by custom and custom holds where law fails.

"Well," said Peters gruffly: "Spill it, youngster . . ."

THEN Brent told them. He held back nothing and when he told how he smashed Gilbert Ware, every man voiced approval. But Ben Livesey held up a hand.

"Let's see where we stand," he said. "Right now it looks this way to me. Ware has concentrated his attention on this ranch. Opp says he has a note on the place. Wilton has brung suit about the water-rights to Five Springs and we're enjoined from fencin' the Springs till the suit is decided."

"Lammert's wrong in that injunction," said Reed. "The title to the Springs is yours till it is shown legally to be wrong."

"Sure. That's law. But Ware owns Lammert and Ware owns Wilton's sheep," They pricked up their ears at that. "Ware's got fifty thousand sheep across the Cataratas just waiting word that the Springs—Hold on! I see the whole damned thing. It's Opp! Ware owns Opp, too. The minute Opp sues out that note and takes the ranch, he owns Five Springs and then Ware will run his sheep over the passes and the valley'll be lost to horned cattle for good an' all! By James! We fight now or go busted. Choose."

"Ware must be eliminated," said Brent shortly.

"Holy Mary man! You don't mean murder?"

"Murder? Of course not. There are other ways of eliminating men. Those damned sheep of Ware's must not cross the hill-passes. If they do, and if Ware and Opp succeed in this scheme to get and hold this ranch, every one of your ranches'll be worthless. Damn the law as it's handed out by Lammert. Ben, you set your men to work. Cut off every drop of water at the Springs so

that not a drop leaves Cincofuentes land. I'll show you how to do it. I had to do it in California Baja. Water was liquid gold there. Run irrigating ditches like cob-webs over the flats. Send a formal notice to Wilton that if he waters one head of stock in Five Springs, he loses that head o' stock. Wilton can't run his sheep on the free range 'cause there's no water there. If those four thousand sheep of Wilton's can get water, Ware'll never try to bring fifty thousand across the hills."

"How'll you enforce that notice?" asked Peters with an oath.

Brent smiled and Livesey drew a sharp breath. He had forgotten that smile. "Who's that comin' up the trail, Ben?" he asked as a rider turned in at the gate.

"I think it's Pike," said Peters. "He dresses like a cow-puncher but he rides like a chamber-maid. He's one of Opp's men too. I wonder what he wants?"

Pike flung out of saddle and held a paper to Livesey.

"This here's from Mr. Ware," he said. "Any answer?"

Not one of the men missed his truculence but no one spoke as old Ben read the letter.

"Go on into the kitchen, Pike and git some coffee," he said.

"I don't want your damned coffee," said Pike.

"Get to hell off this porch and wait over by the corral where the rest of the hogs are," said Ben wrathfully. "I got a few words to say that are none o' your business."

Even Pike could not miss that delicate hint. He wandered off corral-wards and Ben turned to the others.

"This is a notice to me," he said. "Ware writes that as guardian of old Sam, that he does not want Brent Halston on the ranch. He says that when an' if old Sam ever gits out o' that crazy corral he kin do as he chooses but he practically says just what Brent told us. He wants to git rid o' Brent. He says that Brent's presence here means a row with Opp and Wilton. He doesn't mention his-self."

"That means war," said Peters curtly. "What're you goin' to say?"

"Me? I'll tell you. Pike," He raised his voice in a bull-roar that made the ponies in the corral jump and whinny. "Come here!"

PIKE shambled across the yard and stood at the steps while old Ben stared him over as he might have eyed a dead calf on the range.

"You take this verbal message to Gil Ware if your brain kin stand the strain. There's three parts to it:

"First, I'm manager of Cincofuentes rancho on a five-year contract that's got three years yet to run. Under that contract I hire and fire my own men."

"Second: "I'm hirin' right now as my foreman, Brent Halston. He's on my rolls and he stays on my rolls. Ware can't fire me for three years and in that time he'll have robbed the place deaf, dumb and blind. In the meantime he can't interfere with me as manager. An'—that's all I reckon."

"You said there were three parts to your message," said Peters.

"Oh, yes. So I did. Thirdly: You tell Gil Ware that I say that he an' Opp an' Wilton can all three of 'em go to hell. You might add to that 'Love from us all'." And Ben Livesey reached for the water-olla that swung in the hot wind off the flats.

"Well," Ewing rose and wiped his face. "Thank the Lord that's over. Now we know where we stand. What next, Brent?"

"Each one of you cattle-men send a

note to Wilton and warn him to keep his sheep off your land. That'll restrict him to the Free Range. He can get no water there. You Ben," He turned to Livesey. "Give me a few men and let me put a guard over the Springs. First warn Wilton and then leave it to me."

"O. K. Now about this warnin'—"

"For the first offense," said Brent, "the sheep are driven off; for the second they are stampeded . . ."

"Yeah? And after that?"

"After that the herders better take warnin'," said Brent grimly. "I never warn a third time. Mind you! We don't want any shootin' affray in which some twenty-dollar greaser herder is shot. If we have to get a man it'll be Ware."

"I'll give you the men tomorrow," said Ben. "In the meantime we'll send warnin' to Wilton from all of us."

The big men mounted and with a parting word headed homeward by the dusty trails that seemed to begin and end nowhere and Brent found himself alone with old Ben.

The old manager studied his new foreman. He realized suddenly that this tall, lean, grave-faced youngster was not the reckless boy who had left Cincofuentes five years before. To that boy he had given all the pent-up affection that a bachelor can feel. He had taught Brent to rope and ride and shoot. He had taught him to bear adversity like an Indian and prosperity like a Stoic.

"Well, son," he said testily. "Ain't you got a good word to say? How about them sheep."

"I'M not thinkin' about sheep," said Brent heavily. "I'm worryin' about Dad. Judge Lammert declined to even consider me as guardian for Dad. Of course I only meant that as the entrance of the small end of the wedge. Of course we know he's as sane as any of us."

"Ware owns Doc Nevins, body and soul," said Ben. "The other two were just cat's-paws. Lammert and Nevins will both so exactly what Ware says. It looks like we're up against a tough proposition."

"Sure we are. That doesn't bother me. Now Ben, I've got just one thing to say and when I've once said it, I want you to forget that I ever said it."

"Go on."

"First of all, we'll attend to the matter of the sheep. I'll have Lessin handle the legal end of the matter to try to force Dad's release. The more fuss Lessin makes about it the better. He'll attract the public attention. In the meantime I'll take up the sheep question. When that is done, I will see personally that Gilbert Ware makes a personal request to be relieved as guardian. I'll see that Lammert reverses his judgment and that Nevins changes his mind and the opinion of the Board about Dad's insanity."

"How in hell are you goin' to do that?" demanded Livesey incredulously. "Kin you work a miracle?"

"Sure I can," said Brent cheerfully. "I've seen it done and I remember how to do it. There goes the supper gong, Ben. Let's eat. I'll start in on fencin' that water tomorrow. Did you ever stir up a hornet's nest, Ben?"

"I'll say so," said Ben grimly: "And I've smoked out a whole hive. With God's good blessin' that's exactly what we'll do now. Come on to supper."

CHAPTER X

WILTON'S WARRANT

WIRING Five Springs with a five-strand wire fence took time. But other, equally important things had to be done, too.

First a low dam was thrown up across

the valley with but one spill-way for the water. When that was done and riveted with fascines made of aspen and willow scrub under Brent's directions, the place took on a different aspect. Then Ben set his crews to work digging, sprawling irrigating ditches, all radiating from a common center, each with a simple timber sluice-box to control its flow.

Wilton saw it all. He followed every move for it meant success or failure to him. Four thousand sheep must drink daily and water was only to be had at Five Springs or at Carrizo, twenty miles away. No matter where the springs were, those ditches were indubitably on Cincofuentes land. He could not legally object to them yet. They shut him off from the over-flow of the pools and he knew well enough what an attempt to water there meant. Brent had told him. Then the note came.

He read that note from several different angles. He considered his four thousand sheep; he considered what Ware would say and do; he considered what would happen if he disregarded that warning note. Then he hastily got his pony.

Brent, sitting his roan at the edge of the lower pool, saw Wilton coming but paid no attention till Wilton was almost on him; then he turned on the nester.

"You got your warnin'," he said curtly. "Get off Cincofuentes land, That fence is our line."

"I know it is," faltered Wilton. "I—I'd like a word with you, Mr. Halston. What'll I do for water fer my sheep if them ditches are run?"

"You'll do for water just like you'll do when you're in hell," said Brent grimly. "You'll go without it. I'll make one concession, Mr. Wilton, though my orders do not justify it. If you get lumber and build flumes you can carry our wastage over to your land for your sheep but not one head sets foot on Cincofuentes land."

"My God, man," said Wilton dolefully. "I ain't got the money to buy lumber to build a half-mile of flumes. Ware won't give it to me, not even to save his own sheep. I've got four thousand head o' Ware's."

That piece of information was balm to Brett's soul but he gave no sign.

"See your owner," he said shortly. "Everybody knows Ware's financin' you."

"And he won't even O. K. credit fer hawg-meat an' frijoles," mourned Wilson. "S'help me God, I been eatin' lamb an' mutton till I'm beginnin' to bleat an' butt like a damn sheep right now."

"Yeah, an' you smell like sheep, too. If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas."

But Brent was aware of a keen regret. He hated to cut those thirsty animals off from water. Why did it always turn out that justice to the guilty entailed hardship to the innocent? In this case the sheep. He saw four thousand fool sheep, the most helpless as the most unattractive animal dependent on man's care; a stupid, evil-smelling mass but as innocent and as unattractive as so many human beings in the rough. But why should justice, done on Ware and Opp and Wilton, require that these four thousand dumb beasts should perish? He turned on Wilton.

"Look here," he said roughly. "I'm goin' to break my orders for once. Water your herd here now for the last time. Let 'em drink here tonight and then head for Carrizal. It's only twenty miles from here. You can make it by sundown tomorrow."

"Ware'll just about kill me," snuffled Wilton.

"If you drive a foot on Cincofuentes land after you water this night, by God! I'll kill you," said Brent, "and I mean it!"

HE watched the thirst-maddened mass forge belly-deep into the pools; he watched the irridescent ripples float away from their oil-soaked sides; he watched his own roan pony nuzzle the shallows and toss his head refusing to drink the tainted water and his resolve hardened. Then Wilton came up to him.

"I'm kind o' sorry you an' me had that run in last week," he said. "I reckon we was both obeyin' orders. Now look a-here, Halston. You've been white to me in this matter o' water. I'm payin' you fer it. You've saved me maybe four hundred lambs that Ware'd have taken out o' my pay. I'm tellin' you this. You watch your step. I can't say no more. You watch your step. There's men out to git you an' by God! if your foot slips they'll git you. That's all." And he whirled his pony and was gone. And Brent stood staring after him.

That night he rode in to San Simon and found Lessin, as usual, slumped up in his chair glowering over a cigarette. He waked to life as Brent entered.

"I was hopin' you'd come in," he said. "I got some news for you. First, Ware and Opp brought a dozen gunmen in from Ulster. I saw two men I know. They mean trouble; that's plain. Eliot showed me the notice Ewing and Peters and James sent to Wilton."

"Wilton is Ware's agent," said Brent hotly. "Listen. Here's the proof." And he told him all he knew. Lessin nodded.

"That proves my point," he said. "Wilton'll have to move his four thousand sheep down to Carrisal for water and grass. You can look for one thing for certain. Ware's got to save those sheep of Wilton's. His gun-men will raid Cincofuentes water. He's got to get possession of that water to let him bring his big herds across the Cararatas. He's lookin' for Five Springs to be thrown open."

"It won't be thrown open," said Brent laconically.

"I hope not. That's one thing. The other thing is that I got a letter from Washington tellin' me about the man Opp killed. He was a sailor named Jay Wing on the U. S. cruiser *Daphne*. You were right about the word OHIO. It's a Jap word that means 'Good-bye'. Now what?"

"Keep that under your hat till we need to crack down on Opp for murder," said Brent. "What's new about Lammert?"

"Not a thing. I saw Lammert and Nevins. He was the chairman of the medical board that examined your father for his sanity. He went off into the usual drool about 'marked homicidal tendencies.' You'll get nothin' out of those two unless you blast it out."

"We know now that Ware owns Wilton's sheep," said Brent. "We know that Wilton could never have found the money to enter suit for the water-rights of Five Springs. Ware financed it of course. Why? For the right to water there of course. That's a distinct gain for him. That's champerty in law." Lessin grinned at him and slapped a big hand on his knee.

"By God," he said. "If you can prove that you'll land Ware in a lot of trouble. Lammert can't try that case. I just dug up a mortgage for ten thousand dollars that Ware holds on Lammert's house. Whoop! I'll buy a drink this night."

"Enter suit in champerty," said Brent.

"I sure will. I reckon that's sure to

start a fire in Ware's back yard. He'll be so busy lookin' after his own blaze that he'll have no time to devote to his neighbor's smudge.

Brent laughed and agreed and started home wondering what his next step should be. That problem was solved for him. As he rode up to the house a stranger rose from the porch and came to meet him. The house was locked, but Juan Estremadura, the little Mexican cook, was milling about at the wood--pile.

"I'VE been knockin' an' knockin' at the front door," said the man. "No one pays me any mind. An' nobody hollers come in."

"That's considered a sign that nobody wants to see you," said Brent. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I want a man named Brent Halston. My name's Atwood. The old sheriff used to pay me two dollars fer every warrant I serve and the constable does the same. You know this man Halston?"

"Yeah. I know him," said Brent.

"If you kin git him fer me I'll give you a dollar," said Atwood.

"Wait a bit," said Brent. "Maybe he's in the bunk-house. If he knew you wanted to serve a warrant, he'd skip out. Who swore to the warrant?"

"Opp, the new sheriff has sworn to it. They're goin' to git that man Halston. I could tell you a lot o' stuff I've picked up that that man Halston'd give his ears to know."

"You wait," said Brent, "I'll see if he's there."

He fled joyfully, leaving Atwood on the porch. In the bunk-house Lee, Atkins, Wentworth and Zing were throwing dice for pinon nuts to be redeemed on pay day. Each nut was being marked with red ink as a precaution. In a dozen words Brent explained his needs.

"I can't afford to be arrested right now," he said. "Ben and I have a hen on the nest. One of you fellows go on over there and let that fool serve the warrant on you. You'll take the warrant and all you need do is to appear at the hearin'. The minute they find out this fool served the warrant on the wrong man he'll be discharged."

"What's the big idea?" demanded Lee.

"They evidently aim to get me jailed and out of the way," said Brent. "I guess from that that the fruit's about ready to drop."

"Damned if I'll be out of it," quoth Lee. "Here, Zing! You damned square head! You was licked in the last war. It's up to you. You go on over there an' let him serve that warrant on you!"

"He can't do it," said Brent. "He can't speak more'n yes or no in English."

"He don't have to," said Atkins. "He knows the only words that count. Go on, Zing."

They watched him from the bunk-house as he sauntered across the yard. Atwood met him at the steps.

"Are you Mr. Brent Halston?" he asked and held out a paper.

Zing took the paper automatically, as a man takes anything that is offered him, but made no reply.

"There! By God, I've served it," said Atwood. "They told me, Sheriff Opp told me, I'd never serve that warrant on Brent Halston at Cincofuentes. I'll show 'em."

Zing scrutinized the warrant upside down, then rolled it into a wad and thrust it into his hip-pocket and over in the bunk-house they heard his reply as Atwood got his horse and spurred to the gate.

With a muttered oath Brent lifted the roan with heel and rein and hurled him—a living thunderbolt—at the girls tormenter. He went down in a cloud of dust. Meanwhile the girl stared wide-eyed.

"Goddam!" said Zing in a puzzled tone that Lee smote Atkins between the shoulders.

"You was right," he said. "He knowed enough English to do business —with a sheep-man."

"This warrant," Brent read it carefully, "was to keep me out of the way tomorrow night. That can mean but one thing. They've got some hired gunfighters in town if Lessin is right. That must mean that they intend to rush Five Springs tomorrow night. Gettin' ready for Ware to bring down his big bunch o' sheep, I reckon."

"YONDER comes that pretty Miss Gordon what Lee tried to sell a cow to," said Atkins. He pointed to a dust-cloud drifting along the main trail. It was headed toward them and it came fast. That dust-cloud resolved itself into a horse and rider and presently Ethel Gordon drew up her sweating pony at the steps. Almost instantly Brent was at her stirrup amid suppressed grins from the bunk-house where Wentworth was humming a song learned in a place where he ought never to have been.

"I says to her: "What have I done
To merit such a prize?'
She give a scornful glance at me
An' whispers, 'Damn your eyes' . . . "

"Mr. Halston . . ." Ethel was breathless. "I have great news for you. I must tell it quickly. A warrant has been sworn out by Sheriff Opp for your arrest."

"Yes. I know."

"You don't know what I have to tell you. I learned it quite by accident. Last night I was in San Simon and I went to the Paris Cafe for supper. You know the place, the room is divided into a number of booths curtained off. I was in one booth and that man Ware and the new Sheriff Opp came in and sat in the next one. I had not turned on my light so they didn't see me. Their very first words gave them away. I listened and when they stopped talking I went out and got supper at another place. I didn't want them to know any one had overheard what they said."

"What was it?" Brent's tone was tense. Things were beginning to happen.

"First Ware said: 'We've got the old man tucked away safe and I'm his guardian. You've got his note.' They both laughed at that . . . 'for thirty thousand dollars protected by Cincofuentes ranch. Wilton has already brought suit about the water-rights. In a few months we'll be sitting pretty.' Then Opp said: 'Yeah. That's all right but in the meantime we've got to eat. You can't trust Wilton. He's weak'.

"Then Ware said: 'Lessin tried to get me discharged as old Sam Halston's legal guardian and to have this man Brent Halston appointed in my place. But Lammert knows better. I've got the goods on him. He was receiver for a Denver trust company and got away with thirty-five thousand dollars and I've got the proof. Hell, man, I paid his bond! I knew it'd some day be convenient to own a judge. Lammert wears my brand.'

" 'It all comes down to Cincofuentes water,' said Opp. 'I've got a dozen men right here in town who'll take those Springs and hold 'em any time we say. Lammert has already issued an injunction forbidding that old fool Livesey from wirin' the Springs but he done it anyhow. I'll take those men tonight and open the wire.'

"That's about all I heard, Mr. Halston," said Ethel. "I thought that

was so important that I ought not to delay.

The excitement of the recital could not entirely account for the flush of delicate color that ran up to the roots of her hair as Brent looked at her. Their eyes met and hers dropped as that confounded refrain continued from the bunk-house:

"I says to her: 'Kin I do less
'N try to coax you to say 'Yes'?
I tell you, Honey, I'm sure itchin'
To have you cookin' in my kitchen.'"

"I MUST go now." And Ethel gathered her horse with heel and rein. "I hope no one saw me come. Those men are dangerous, Mr. Halston."

"They won't be long." Something in Brent's tone made her glance at him. "Wait just a minute, please. I want to ride back with you."

In a moment he caught up the roan, slipped the loop of a lariat about the lower jaw and vaulted to his back. The roan arched his back and gave a few "crow-hops" and whinnied gently.

"He knows his master," thought Ethel. But her eyes were on Brent. "I love a good horse," she said.

"That's why the good Lord made 'em," said Brent. "The vaqueros in California Baja say that every land has something that others lack. They say God gave California major gold. He gave some lands fine crops and rich mines but to the vaqueros, whom He loves above all other men, he gave fine horses. Their reasonin' may be faulty but they've got the horses."

They headed off down the trail and Ethel's eyes were on him. Every motion of his body swaying to the gait of his horse told of the perfect rider. Being bare-backed, Brent naturally took that perfect seat that is shown so perfectly in early Greek art; that no modern writer has described half so well as Xenophon. She nodded her bright head in mute approval but said nothing as they swept down the trail in full gallop.

"There's that man Wilton," she said finally and jerked a pretty chin at a distant hill-top. "I suppose he saw me go up to Cincofuentes."

"Suppose he did. I'll attend to him," said Brent. "He'll not get off with a shaking this time." And he pulled up the roan to a sliding stop but her light hand was on his arm.

"No, no. You've got troubles enough of your own. You mustn't take mine, too."

"Huh. I'm like a puppy; my troubles are all ahead of me," he laughed. "You've helped me a lot by what you've told me. If Ware is right, I'm just a worthless wastrel from the Back of Beyond; one who could not make his own living so came home to cadge one off his father. Someday, when I have the right; when I have won place and saddle of my own I'm comin' to you with what I have."

She could not mistake that; nor could she mistake the blaze in his usually placid eyes. Her own eyes drooped as his hand fell on hers.

"Don't tell me you've known me only a few days," he said laughing. "Time should not be reckoned by hours. It ought to be counted by heart-beats. Feel how you make mine beat." And before she could even begin a struggle, he seized her hands and held them to his heart. Then he opened them and very gently kissed the centers of the palms.

"Are you very angry?" he asked.

"Not as angry as I should be had some one seen you acting so foolishly. Here we are. Good-bye."

He was out of saddle while she was speaking and, fairly whirling her out of saddle, set her, flushed and laughing,

on her feet. Then, before she could even have thought of resisting, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"That's the first," he said and even in the brief moment of swift wrath she realized that there was no lightness in his tone. She was flushed and very serious as she walked up the path to the door lashing the bushes with her *romal*. Brent Halston had made her think.

THE roan travelled homeward ventre-a-terre and the four men were still grinning over Lee's minstrelsy when Brent shot into the bunk-house.

"One of you get, Ben," he said curtly. "This is big news. I'll be over to the house in a minute. Tell Ben to wait for me.

Livesey was waiting on the porch when Brent came. Both men were serious. They sensed that the time had come for action.

"Well, son, what is it?" asked Ben.

"Miss Gordon just rode up a bit ago, Ben, to tell me that she was in San Simon and overhead Ware and Opp plannin' to send a bunch of men out tonight to seize Five Springs and hold 'em till the court decides Wilton's suit."

"Then that means that Ware and Opp already have been told what the court's decision will be," growled Ben.

"I suppose we're in trouble right now," grunted Brent. "Of course I disregarded the injunction that Lammert gave about the fencin' of the Springs. We have broken the law, and I suppose—"

"Huh. Lammert's law! Ware's law! To hell with that," quoth Ben warmly. "If old Moses could bust the whole Ten Commandments just 'cause he seen the Jews worshippin' a golden calf and git away with it, I reckon I kin bust just a part of one when sheep are involved. Anyhow, them commandments talks a lot about oxen an' asses. You mustn't covet 'em none. But it don't even mention sheep. I reckon that's cause the Lord knowed nobody but a damned fool'd covet sheep. The Lord's likely a cow-man."

"Who? What are you talkin' about?" demanded Brent dazedly. "Give me five men. You ride in to San Simon yourself, Ben, and stay there. We can't afford to have you and me both arrested for what's goin' to happen tonight. You must have a perfect alibi."

It took an hour or argument but Livesey finally gave way.

"Pick your men," he said. "Take only volunteers."

"I can't take them all," said Brent grinning. "They all want to go."

"I know. Darn it all. You'll all get Opp after you and then I'll have no cook or hands here," said Ben testily. "Git out o' here and tend to your business. If you fail to drive them men off I hope Ware's sheep bite you."

The five men gathered behind the bunk-house received Brent joyously. They left in the young moon-light that checkered the whole wide mesa with silver and threw windy shadows across the flat spaces between the mesquite clumps. No sound accompanied their passing but the low swish of parting brush and the creaking of the filled shoulder-belts as they took the trail. The young moon winked at them from behind the cloud-rack as they took the trail to Five Springs.

CHAPTER XI

OUTLAWED

FOR that night's work horses would have been an added care. They went afoot. Cat-claw and water-willow, chollo and mesquite

snatched at them, but they hurried on. In the young moonlight that deceives the eyes, cows bulked as huge as elephants as they blundered to their knees under the very feet of the hurrying men. Brent snatched at Lee as they topped a ridge and outlined to him briefly what had happened. The rest of the party needed no more than an occasional word to tell them the seriousness of the matter. Those men at Cincofuentes had come to the place since Brent had left home but work and sweat make a strong cement. Loyalty to their brand was their creed. So long as they were not asked to commit an actual crime, they were heart and soul with Brent. Part of that loyalty Brent had won in the short time he had been back at Cincofuentes; part of it had been won by old Sam Halston. Brent sensed it as they hurried along the narrow trail. The chapparal was filled with foot-wide trails, deep-trodden in the hard soil, the trails water-bound cattle make at sunset using those same trails for years.

"It's a pretty darned rotten homecomin', Brent," said Weeks. "All the boys been sayin' what a rotten break you've had."

"It'll change," said Brent soberly. "Ever play roulette, Slim?"

"Me? Sure I have."

"This is the same thing. You play odd and even and you play red and black. Time after time you lose and double up your bets and keep on playin' an' losin' till you make up your mind to quit 'cause you can't afford to lose your undershirt."

"Yeah. That's right. Only I lost mine," said Weeks grinning.

"I'm not goin' to. That's the time to double your bets and keep on placin' your bets. That's what I'm doing now."

"Here we are," said Perkins in a low whisper. "In time too. There's no one here ahead of us. That's sure."

The Springs lay like a great lake under the misty light and the heavy wire fences stood up like formidable barriers against the water-mist that rose in a blanket from the ponds. Great fat lily pads showed in black splotches against the gray water and a few mud-hens clucked and quacked on the far side. Once a great fish splashed.

"Listen." Brent raised a warning hand. "Hear that?"

Full and clear at one moment, then merging into the steady murmur of the heavy night wind in the cottonwoods, they caught a sound they well knew, the put-put-put-put of galloping hoof-beats.

"A mile away and comin' fast," Brent always dropped his g's under pressure, "Quick, men! The fences mark the outside limit of Cincofuentes land. I'll stop 'em the other side of the fences. No man can touch wire or water."

"It's a rotten shootin' light if they try to rush us," growled Lee fingering his rifle.

"That's what they mean to do," warned Brent. "You know Opp and Ware and Wilton have all been warned. If they come on this land after that warnin' they're trespassing. But don't shoot to kill if you can help it."

THE roaring hoof-beats swept up the valley. Then suddenly a line of swiftly moving ponies shouldered aside the billows on the water-fog and black figures loomed high in the murky light. Brent's voice rang out sharp and high.

"Halt there!" His pistol cracked and spat a jet of sparks into the night!

That on-coming line jerked to a halt as though they had all been brazed on one rod and a babel of voices rose.

"You! Opp! Where the hell's Opp? He told us nobody's be here! Pass Opp up here. This is his job first of

all." And they milled about uncertainly. And stiffened into attention as Brent loomed big in the fog.

"You men stop where you are," he said warningly. "We don't want any trouble with you but you can't touch Cincofuentes wire or water. Opp and Ware have fooled you. I've got a dozen rifles in the madrono scrub. If you move, I'll open fire."

His sharp summons shrilled high above the noises of the night. Then silence fell.

"Tell Opp I want to have a word with him. I'm Halston of Cincofuentes."

A dozen hands pulled Opp from his saddle and thrust him forward till he paused a couple of yards from Brent. Opp was no coward. He had proved that a score of times but he had paid these men to take the risk that he did not deem necessary for himself to take. Now that he held all the cards in his hand ready to be played was no time to take a chance. All he and Ware had to do was to remove this interloper who had appeared in the person of Brent Halston and all would be well. He had not believed the Cincofuentes men would be on the job. He could not imagine how they had got warning. If Brent really had a dozen rifles in the madrono scrub, the game was up! He glowered at Brent through the fog and even that fog did not hide his truculence.

"One warrant was served on you today," he snarled. "I'd think that was enough to hold you. That was fer Wilton. He needs warrants. I don't. I 'tend to my own cases."

"Not very well," said Brent coolly. "All you can do, you damned murderer, is to shoot down unarmed men. Remember how I smashed your face when you tried pullin' a gun on me before?"

Even Opp could not stand that. With a hoarse roar, he dived at Brent. In his eager haste to get his hands on the man who had twice bested him, he forgot rifle and pistol. He longed to feel Brent's windpipe give under his clutch. He leaped suddenly but even more suddenly Brent side-stepped in the shadows and lashed out in a terrific side-sweep with the barrel of his rifle. This was no time for chivalry in fight. Opp went down in a wild whirl of arms and legs and weapons and Brent stood by him as he rose.

"You've been warned to keep off Cincofuentes land," he said. "This water's closed to sheep."

"You'll learn about that, you damned fool," stormed Opp. He burst into a volley of acrid-voiced profanity and stood feeling his jaw where Brent had hit him. "Don't forget that I hold your fool father's note for thirty thousand dollars signed before he went crazy an' tried to buck Gil Ware."

He stopped as a man touched him on the arm. Then he went on:

"You've violated the court's injunction in fencin' these Springs. I'll git me a bench warrant to hold you fer that. You'll be served a real warrant tomorrow."

"Good. In the meantime get your men off today."

Opp's men dropped back uncertainly toward the horses and were still in doubt when a shout rose from one of the men.

"Hell, Sheriff," he shouted. "He lied to you. He ain't got a dozen men. I saw 'em all. He's got five men with him. Let's rush him."

AT the word they rushed. A dozen big figures hurtled out of the fog and, before trigger could be pulled the line of Opp's men closed with the six men from Cincofuentes. Lee went backward over a dead log. Thompson, on

his back under two men, fought like a trapped wolf with teeth and hands as he strove to get at his gun. Brent leaped straight at Opp just as the burly sheriff himself rushed and they crashed into each other on the muddy edge of the deepest part of the Springs. Flung back by Opp's weight, Brent staggered and sank to his knees in the soft mud. The clogging mass clung like a dead weight to him and the blow, that ought to have knocked Opp flat, struck him in the throat. Opp merely grunted and fell, then a sudden shout arose.

Brent could not distinguish the words. He did not need to! He heard the sharp "spang" of a cut wire released; then another! And another! Then a sudden shot jarred out and a startled shriek rose from a wounded horse. A scattered volley jarred the night as Brent, finally free of the bog, leaped for solid land.

"Back all you Cincofuentes men!" he shouted. "Take cover . . . ! Rifles, men. Cover!"

"Cover hell . . ." (Brent could never tell who that was). "They're on our land! Give 'em hell!"

That half-light, that Lee had said was rotten for shooting, saved some of Opp's men. That burst of rifle fire took them by surprise. Intent on cutting the wire and rushing their opponents, they had left their rifles on their horses and those horses were dancing crazily among the brush. Even in that deceptive half-light a woman could have shot them as they fought desperately for their horses.

"Let go, you damned fool! That's my pony not yours . . . You've got the wrong horse I tell you . . ." (That was Opp's voice). Then his wrathful clamor rose to heaven: "What the hell do I care whose horse I git . . . ? Mine's down . . . Git me . . . Ah! You will, will 'yuh? Take that!"

A handful of red sparks jetted from a pistol muzzle and a dark figure swung across a saddle. Another figure lurched sideways in the misty light; a figure that shouted in shrill-accented terror and clutched his belly with both hands as he spun around like a bug on a pin. Then Opp spurred his horse straight across the falling man and knocked him over. The next moment the steady beating of galloping hoofs rose in a roar from the departing men.

Brent took account of stock. No one seemed to be seriously hurt but no one was entirely satisfied. Lee had a skinned fist and a wrenched arm, Thompson a strained leg and Brent a bruised body where he and Opp had clashed.

"An', damned fools that we are, they cut the wire," mourned Weeks. "But if we hadn't been here, they'd have ruined all our fencin' an' we'd have found an armed guard over our water. What ails Perkins?"

Brent glanced up sharply at Perkins running swiftly up one of the many narrow trails to the spot where the raiders' ponies stood.

"One of 'em got what was comin' to him," he shouted over his shoulder.

They were after him like a pack of hounds and almost as one man they flung themselves at a body that lay prone among the brush. Perkins struck a match.

"It's Winn," he growled. "He's a nester from down by Perla. He runs sheep down there. What ails him?"

"Ails him?" Brent looked, examined and turned away sick. "Knifed. Somebody gutted him. That's all! Look here." He pointed to a long bloody gash across the man's stomach. The clothing had been ripped away an one great sweeping cut of a big knife had ripped open the entire body. "Gutted him like an antelope," said Brent

faintly. "Somebody get some water. The man's dyin'."

Weeks ran to the pond, filled his hat and was back instantly. The wounded man raised his hands to his face, saw the blood dripping from his wrists and shuddered.

"Opp done it," he gasped. He tried to raise himself but his wrists gave way. "The ponies stampeded! Opp done told us we'd not have to fight. He got away. He was fightin' to git my horse! I hope I shot him...! Opp done this . . .!"

He rolled over in his agony, clutched at the gaping cut that ran from rib to rib and stiffened suddenly.

"He's gone," said Weeks who had seen men die under a knife before.

"You men remember what he said about Opp," said Brent warningly. "That's an ante-mortem statement and is admissable in any court. Be sure you remember what he said. This ought to cinch that man Opp."

"You never kin be sure," said Weeks soberly. "I've knowed Opp a good many years. He's like a side-winder. You squash his head with a rock and you're sure he's done for but he kin wriggle his tail till sundown. What now Brent? There comes the sun."

The red ball shot suddenly up from behind the dark line of the Cataratas that stood out like cast-iron peaks. Mesquite and chollo, palo verde and great unsightly biznags pricked out against the yellow plain and they could see long lines of thirsty cattle heading up for the Springs.

"Fix the wire first of all," said Brent. "They've pulled out more'n they've cut. It'll not take long."

Working with rocks and pistol butts, using their spurs as wrenches (And that is a trick that is not learned from books) they got the fence repaired. It was high noon when Brent stopped them.

"I'll quit now and get back at once to Cincofuentes," he said. "Lee, you come with me. The rest of you stay here till dark. If we decide to keep a guard on the water tonight, I'll send out men to relieve you and I'll send out some grub and hot coffee." And he and Lee hurried off on the Cincofuentes trail.

LIVESEY, riding in at the gate, raised a shout of welcome. His eyes showed worry and he eyed Brent so pathetically that Brent was moved to grin.

"What's the use of holdin' a lodge of sorrow over me, Ben?" he said. "I've done nothin'."

"Huh. You n' me thinks different about nothin'," said Livesey. "Did you see Opp last night?"

"Did we? Lee, tell him what happened."

"Lee told him to the point of profanity and Ben's eyes bulged. "I was at the hotel in San Simon like you said; to establish an alibi," he said coolly. "Hell broke loose this mornin'. Opp got back with his men. Less one I hear. A man named Winn. That was the man you say Opp knifed. All right. Opp must have been damned sure of his own knife. Look here."

He thrust a paper into Brent's hands.

"Opp swore he seen you, Brent, kill Winn with a knife. Two of the men have sworn to it, too. Read that paper."

Brent took it and read:

$1000 REWARD!
FOR BRENT HALSTON
DEAD OR ALIVE

"Wanted for the murder of Fred Winn. Guilt is already proved by affidavits of

Sheriff Opp and two witnesses to murder."

Brent read it, folded it up and handed it back to Ben.

"What'll you do now?" demanded Ben. "Damned if I can see the light. From now on every nester and sheep man who needs money'll feel justified to crack down on you on sight. You can't fight the whole County!"

"Thank God, I don't have to," said Brent warmly. "Don't you see, Ben? This is just a plant on the part of Ware and Opp to get me out of the way. Their interest is flattering. It means that they're afraid of what I can do. All right. Now I'll go ahead and do it."

"Do what? What can you do?" demanded Ben.

"First of all the ranch has got to be saved. If they ever have even a quasi-legal title given them they can fight it for years and Ware has the money to fight. We haven't. First of all, we'll prevent this ranch from being turned over to Opp in satisfaction of that note. After that we'll keep Ware's sheep North of the Cataratas and at the same time we'll get Dad out of that bug-house."

"When Opp sues out that note Lammert'll arrange a court-title for the ranch," said Livesey. "And they've offered a reward for you dead er alive. That'll keep you out of the game. Just as soon as Opp gits title to them Springs, every sheep North of the hills 'll be down on us. God help every cattleman in the Valley. In the meantime you got to git out o' here. I don't seem able to think like I used to," he said heavily.

"I can," said Brent. "You know Suppai Caves, Ben?"

"Good Lord, yes." Ben Livesey remembered those caves well. An old Suppai Indian Jose Beltran had lived there with his squaw when Brent was a boy. They made little gewgaws of Indian pottery for sale at the railroad station in San Simon and little articles of jewelry. No one had visited those caves since old Jose died. They were three deep, narrow dark holes in the almost inaccessible hill-side. "You can't live there long."

"I don't want to. It'll all be over in two weeks, Ben. There's a small spring in the middle cave. I remember old Jose showed it to me. Load a pack-mule with blankets and some grub and let old Juan come with me. A white man gets too impatient over a long wait. Beside that if I need to send a message old Juan can pass where a white man would be stopped."

"If you have occasion to send a message send it to Ethel Gordon," said Ben astutely. "Don't forget that with that reward out for your scalp Cincofuentes'll be watched like a cougar's lair."

"What're you goin 'to do?" asked Ben as Brent headed for the house.

"First of all I want to explain to Juan," said Brent. "He may not care to accompany an outlaw."

JUAN, summoned from the kitchen, looking like an old Indian idol, said not a word as Brent explained. The old man's eyes lit slowly but he gave no other sign. Presently:

"Senor," he said, "years ago your father brought me here. I was sick and poor. He asked me no questions. He tended me and gave me food and hope. He never called me 'Greaser,' it was always: 'Juan, do this or that' or perhaps 'Amigo, do thus.' Senor, I would go to hell for that man."

"You kin get a thousand dollars, Juan, just by shootin' Brent here in the back some dark night," said Ben.

Juan regarded him unsmilingly, "Senor," he said: "Have you ever wondered what questions Judas Iscariot asked himself before he betrayed his Master?"

"By God, I'm answered." And old Ben looked ashamed of himself as he set to work to gather supplies for Brent and Juan. He got them together in a decent pack while Juan caught up a light-footed Mexican pack-mule. When the aparejos were packed and swung and the ponies saddled Ben turned to Brent.

"I ain't a little bit satisfied," he growled. "I want to know what you aim to do."

"Ben." Brent's face was like a graven image, "I'm not goin' to tell you what I mean to do. I'm prayin' God that I don't have to do it but if I have to. By God! I will. I've got just two chances to free my father and save the old ranch. If I delay, the ranch will pass to Opp and Ware will eventually get it. He wants it for his damned sheep. I can only tell you this: Wait and see."

"All right. All I've got to say is: If you need or want anything, either send Juan straight here or, better still, send him to Ethel Gordon and I'll ask her to send word. In the meantime you'd better wait till dark to make your get-away."

"And you keep in touch with Lessin," said Brent. "What he does may be important. I don't think Lessin can make Lammert do anything—till I take hold," he added, almost below his breath.

"What 'd you say?" demanded Ben sharply.

"I say we'll be goin' now. Come on, Juan. We're outlaws now." He slapped spurs to the roan and held him in at the same time, and the pony rose on his hind legs and whirled on his haunches as on a pivot.

"Si, Señor!" Juan grinned reminiscently. "I have been an outlaw in my own land—*un forajido*—. It is not bad, *Señor*. I will show you. Never use wood to make a fire. Never drink water from a pool. Never throw aside food or tobacco on a trail. It will return to curse you. And, above all . . never spit on a trail! *Aho, Señor,* I will teach you all I know."

"And I'm beginnin' to believe you've got you a darned good teacher," quoth big Ben Livesey as Juan snatched the blinds from his saddle and struck the pack-mule across the rump with a sharp oath. She shook till her packs rattled and trotted out of the corral with Juan at her heels, and they were swallowed up by the dusk.

CHAPTER XII

THE CAPTURE

"HERE, Juan. Put the horses in here."

They rushed the ponies and the laboring pack-mule into the middle cave where a small spring trickled down the rock-face through a film of water-moss to form a small pool that old Jose Beltram had scooped out years before. When he had the horses stabled, Juan took a couple of empty sacks and headed for the open.

"I am going for fuel for the fire and mesquite beans for the horses," he said. "Show no light, Senor, till I return. Spread a blanket over the entrance. We can take no chances."

While Juan was gone Brant tried to formulate his plans. Much depended on what Lessin could do and Lessin would need not only money but also a power of attorney for, now that he was

outlawed, Brent dared not appear in public.

In an hour Juan was back with his load and dumped the contents of his sacks on the floor of the cave.

"Mesquite beans for the horses," he said. "And dry cattle droppings for our fires. They give a hotter fire than coal and they give no smoke. What next, Senor?"

"I'm afraid I must take a chance and go to San Simon, Juan," said Brent. "I have got to see Mr. Lessin in person."

"You take a great risk, Senor," said Juan gravely, "but if you go at night the danger will be less. Do not ride the roan pony, Senor. Too many people have seen you on him. Ride the pack-mule."

"I will. That's a good suggestion. I'll leave after dark, Juan, and I'll be back by daylight."

By first star-light he picked his way down the narrow trail with the mule stepping gingerly at his heels. The desert air grew cold in his nostrils and the night was filled with the sharp, acrid smell of the sage-brush. A coyote sent up his soul-searching yelping and was answered from afar; then a lobo sent up a wailing yell from a distant hill; the most desolate of all night noises and Brent felt his blood run chill. Then he came out on the open mesa above the canon and headed southwestward for San Simon.

"This is Thursday," he muttered. "If it was Saturday the streets'd be jammed, but there's not much risk now. The public streets of San Simon are about the last place any one would look to see an outlaw."

He slipped into town from the west side and, keeping to the dark side of the streets, well under the line of dwarfed cotton-woods, he worked his way across the railroad tracks to Lessin's little bungalow nesting its grove of spreading China-berry trees. The blind in the sitting-room was up and he could see Lessin reading a paper under the lamp and could hear his occasional hearty curse as a big bug "zooned" above the lamp and hit his paper like a falling brick. The sound of the mule's feet made him glance up and Brent could see him listening intently; then the light suddenly went out. Brent swiftly dismounted, tied his mule to a tree and walked lightly up the steps.

"Lessin," he said in a muted tone.

"That you, Halston? Brent Halston. I heard the hoof-beats and I was sure it was this mule from Cincofuentes. She always forgets two paces out of five. You can tell her step in a million. I figured some one comin' in from the ranch. But you? My fathers, man, but this is madness. Any one of Opp's men'll crack down on you at sight."

"I know it but I had to come," said Brent. "There are some things to be done that no one else can do. First of all I want to make out all papers necessary to enable you to act for me in my absence so you can legally attend to all my business. Then I want to write out a check for my bank-balance so you can get it cashed. Can you fix up the papers right away?"

"Of course. You sit right here in the darkness. I'll write the papers in the kitchen. We'll not take the risk of havin' anyone see you."

HE took pen and paper and disappeared into the dark kitchen. Then Brent saw a lamp leap full-flame and heard the pen squealing across the paper. Presently Lessin came back and held out a paper.

"Sign this," he said. And Brent, by the dim light of the kitchen lamp signed the paper and a check and handed them to Lessin.

"Now that's done I feel easier," he said. "There's one other thing that you ought to know. That man Opp killed a man over at the Springs. He was a nester named Winn, I'm told, and he lived over near Perla. Opp knifed him."

"Damn that man Opp," growled Lessin. He's a perfect fiend with a knife. So is our friend Ware. I can't imagine where or how they learned it. It's queer for a white man to be taken that way. As a rule an Anglo-Saxon fears and hates cold steel. It takes a Latin to love a cold blade. I reckon it must be workin' with them sheep that teaches dirty games. Where you or I would go for a gun, Ware or Opp will take a knife."

"Opp shot that man Wing," reminded Brent.

"That's so. That's the exception that proves the rule. Who knows about this man Winn?"

"You can get signed statements from Weeks and Thompson and Perkins over at Cincofuentes," said Brent. "They all heard Winn say that Opp knifed him. Winn knew he was dying so it will have all the value of an ante-mortem statement."

"That's good," grunted Lessin. "That ought to cinch Mr. Opp when we get around to his case. Even Judge Lammert can't help a man much who is convicted of two deliberate murders. As soon as I can get the necessary affidavits, I will see the District Attorney. What else?"

"About that note of my father's for thirty thousand dollars that Opp claims to hold. Have you ever seen it?"

"Yes. I had a hasty glance at it. When I first became interested in this I saw Opp. He was rotten mean about it. He said that you have no legal status in the case and consequently have no right to demand to see the note. He says that Ware is your father's legal guardian and that if Ware is satisfied about the note that you have no kick. I understand that between them they have arranged for Lammert to make out a court-title for Cincofuentes for Opp just as soon as he turns over that note to Ware. They're actin' mighty quick, it seems to me."

"So do I." Brent rose. "I think that's all, Lessin. I will communicate with you through Ben Livesey. Good night."

Lessin followed him to the darkened doorway and laid a hand on his arm.

"Remember what I told you about Ware and Opp both bein' knife-men," he said. "They're doubly dangerous. Steel is so damned quiet. Look out for dark corners if those two are in the vicinity."

Brent swung into saddle and started the mule down the dark street. There were few street-lights in San Simon, a dim lantern perched on a post warned of the railroad crossing and a few smaller lights before busy saloons showed where the riff-raff was holding high revel.

"They must have got a new shipment of cold beer," muttered Brent. "I reckon I'd better steer right clear of that railroad crossing if I don't want to be seen."

He headed for another place to cross the double line of tracks when Fate, who dearly loves to throw sand into human machinery, threw a handful.

A SPUR of single-track left the main line at the precise point where Brent elected to cross the right of way, and the spur and the main-line were joined by a "frog"—a V-shaped device for that purpose that has angles between the rails. The already tired mule stumbled over a cross-tie, nimbly

changed foot and caught her nearest forefoot in the angle of the frog and was held as firmly as though in a vise. Then, like all mules, she lost all semblance of sanity when she found her foothold insecure and went frankly crazy as all mules do. She flung herself up and back with a startled scream of terror that echoed through the night and aroused all of San Simon.

Brent fell clear of the crazy mule. He rose to his feet, felt his neck that he feared was broken, and then ran to the mule's head. She had wrenched loose and was standing on three feet in a puddle of blood. The entire hoof had been pulled off the near fore-foot exactly as a man's finger-nails may be pulled out by force, and the shell of the hoof was stuck between the bars of the "frog." The shrill scream had given the alarm, and the saloons across the street slammed open and vomited forth a score of men.

Brent turned swiftly and headed across the tracks. This was no time to be seen or delayed. San Simon and the whole neighborhood was aroused and he had no means to get back to Suppai Caves. He must go afoot and he must hurry all he could. For a moment he fingered his six-gun. Every instinct of mercy told him to kill the mule to put her out of her misery, but of course that meant to take a risk.

"Hell!" he muttered; "I can't leave her like this, and all life's a risk."

He felt for the hollow at the base of her left ear, pressed it with his gun-muzzle and fired.

The next moment three burly figures hurled themselves on him out of the darkness and by sheer weight threw him on his back and held him fast while a fourth man struck a match. By the flickering flame Brent recognized young Wilton and knew at once that Wilton knew him.

"By God! It's Halston," shouted Wilton. "We've earned two hundred and fifty each by this piece o' luck. Who talks about hard luck now? Hey, there, Opp! Opp, I say . . . !"

His hail stopped Opp, the newly elected Sheriff, in his tracks. In a moment he was with them. He jerked Wilton aside, snatched the dimly burning lantern from its socket on the post and held it close to Brent's face as he lay on his back with a man flat on each arm and a third man sitting across his legs and holding his feet.

"Eyuh!" Opp let go a gusty oath. "I'd rather have this bird 'n any Christmas turkey you ever seen. Pull his hands together . . . "

Brent's furious struggles made the crowd laugh. Two men jerked his hands together and Opp snapped a pair of steel handcuffs about his wrists.

"You kin let him up now," he snarled.

BRENT said not a word as they jerked him roughly to his feet, but his heart was sick within him. Not one of his thousand thoughts was for himself; all were for that father whom he loved, now betrayed into the hands of enemies that Brent well knew were merciless. This capture meant that his own life would be sworn away; that his father would be robbed of place and fortune beyond any hope of recovery and would, under guise of the law, be doomed to spend the rest of his like a pauper prisoner. Brent Halston was under no illusions about the character of his foes.

"Take him up to the jail," said Opp breathlessly. "We've got a nice airy cage fer birds like him. Wilton, you come along, too. I want you to make a statement. I'm glad I was here. You all 're mighty lucky at that. This 'll

mean an extra five-spot for each of you."

At that Wilton burst into furious speech.

"A five spot! You're a crazy fool, Opp. Who caught this man? Was it you or us? We caught him and you talk to us of five-spots . . . "

"I've got to certify to the reward, ain't I?" asked Opp. "All I got to say is, I won't certify nobody for more 'n five dollars. All you did was to help. If you don't want that five-spot, don't take it. You'll git no more."

They milled about uncertainly. To be short-changed and brow-beaten by Opp was no new thing in San Simon, but this was just a little too raw. But there was no recourse, so they sullenly pocketed the bills he reluctantly passed out and shuffled over to an open bar-room, leaving Opp and Wilton with their prisoner.

"Up the street with you now." Opp thrust Brent forward so violently that he stumbled and almost fell. "When I've locked you up, you kin take your time. I reckon you ain't got a whole lot o' time left."

The San Simon jail lay in the rear of the court-house, facing the open square. It was enclosed by three-foot adobe walls and stood behind the Sheriff's Office, with which it was connected by a long corridor. The jail itself was simply a huge square room, in the center of which a great square steel cage had been built. Between the cage and the walls a four-foot passageway circled the room, and the big cage itself was partitioned off into four smaller cages, each of which contained a double-decked steel cot, a stool, a table and a wash-basin. All cells were at present empty, for San Simon was in the throes of a spasm of unwonted virtue, which meant that no one had shot or poisoned anyone in a week. Anything less than that was considered a virtue by the new sheriff. A sleepy turnkey dozing in a great chair by the door was prodded into wakefulness by Opp's foot.

"Wake up, Fatty," he shouted. "What d'you mean by sleepin' on the County's time? Wake up an' show us the bridal suite," said Opp, who was a wit of sorts.

"Fatty" King rose ponderously. His real name was Nosmo, but he had almost forgotten it. Men said that when he was a child his father and mother had a furious debate as to what his name should be. That debate, carried on over three pay-days, was settled by King Senior. He came home one night more than a little drunk and insisted that in a vision he had been instructed to baptize the child "Nosmo."

"There ain't no name like that," objected his wife.

"There is, too," said King. "Ain't I just told it to you? We'll name him Nosmo."

HE was so named, and not for two full years did his mother discover the real origin of the name that his father insisted he was given in a dream.

Mr. King, indulging in potations to celebrate the birth of that son who was to inherit a lame horse, two pigs and a sod barn, had gone to sleep in the bar of the Silver Dollar saloon. Entrance to that bar was given through a door, slatted and cut in two parts, that bore bore the legend:

"NO SMOKING"

But the artist who painted that door was a stickler for symmetry, as a result of which the lettering of the sign was evenly divided between the two halves of the door. A man coming in for a drink held a half of that door

open while he waited for a friend. As a result of that delay, Mr. King, awakened suddenly, was confronted by a name in great letters that sounded singularly musical and appropriate. The two words of the sign were divided by the open doors into the words . . .

NOSMO KING

But he was called "Fatty."

He rose ponderously to his feet and took a big bunch of keys from the table drawer.

"The Sheriff on'y gits thirty cents a day to board prisoners," he growled. "If you want better grub 'n beans and flap-jacks you put up the dough yourself plus a ten per cent commission to me for waitin' on yuh."

"He'll not be with us very long," said Opp. "He's the man who killed Fred Winn down at Cincofuentes. Cut his belly open. He's young Brent Halston."

"The hell you say," said Fatty with suddenly aroused interest. "The son o' the crazy man, huh? Maybe it runs in the family. Seems to me a kind of political crime to make the county stand the cost of tryin' a man fer murder when he might just as well be locked up as crazy on an order from court."

Opp stared at King. That thought had been in his head, too, ever since Brent had been captured. How to get rid of him? Alive, Brent Halston was a constant menace. Dead, he would cause no further trouble to anyone. King unlocked a cage door and they thrust Brent inside. He stood like a man dazed while Opp unlocked the handcuffs and then stepped aside and thrust Brent back. In a flash Sheriff and turnkey were outside the cage and the latticed door clanged into place. Then Opp turned away satisfied. He had at last almost done away with the troublesome element in his problem. Brent Halston would be tried and convicted of the murder of Fred Winn and Cincofuentes would pass to himself and to Ware. He stopped at the desk, but Ware's voice from the Sheriff's office suddenly hailed him. Brent heard that voice and it aroused every fighting instinct in him. What business could Ware have here? What did his presence here mean? The words were clear and distinct, for Gilbert Ware, knowing that Brent was under lock and key, did not care who heard what he had to say. Besides that he was sure that he and Opp were alone. Then Opp's sharp voice that had a timbre peculiarly penetrating came back along the corridor.

"I'm tellin' you, Ware, the thing is settled right now. We've got this Brent Halston, the man from Baja, right now in the cells. He'll be tried and convicted of havin' killed Fred Winn. You can have Lammert make that title of court for Cincofuentes rancho right away. I'll give you the note tomorrow. That 'll clear both our skirts in case any other heir should turn up after Brent Halston's gone."

"I don't like this business of tryin' Halston," said Ware curtly. "The law's too damned uncertain. Suppose he gets a sharp lawyer and demands a change of venue and gets it. If the case is tried before old Lammert all right, but it may come before someone else. It'd be hell to have this man Halston get clear and talks."

"Huh. It's too late to do anything else now," said Opp.

"No it ain't. It's just the right time," said Ware, and Brent found himself craning toward the door to catch the answer. He caught every word. Neither man would have cared, anyhow. Brent Halston was certainly help-

less and in their clutches. "If you, as Sheriff, leave the town for a short time, a mob might, if properly stirred up, settle this thing once and for all. The town's full o' sheep-men. That man Winn was a sheep-man. It's a damned outrage that a man can't raise a few sheep without bein' in danger from these crazy-eyed cow-hands that think they own God Almighty's earth. By the way, the Wiltons are in town, and old man Wilton has four thousand sheep."

"That belong to Gilbert Ware," snapped Opp. "But it might be done. I can leave, of course. Reckon you can take hold and let the boys know what a menace to health and prosperity this here man Brent Halston is? If I'm away, I'll not be responsible for what's done in my absence."

Then the door slammed and silence fell.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ESCAPE

DURING that night and most of the next day, Brent's memory seemed intent on playing tricks on him. Those words? Had he really heard them or were they just the phantasmagoria of a tired brain? He solved the problem when King grumblingly thrust his dinner at him.

"Why didn't you let me see Mr. Ware when he was here last night?" he asked casually.

"He didn't want to see you. He only wanted to see Opp," snapped King.

So it was true, then! He had not dreamed those speeches. He had not dreamed a criminal plot. Then Opp must have left town.

"How soon 'll Opp be back?" he asked.

"He's went to see about the family of that man Winn you killed," said King. And Brent had all he could do to keep from protesting his innocence.

When King left, Brent rose and padded softly up and down his cell.

First of all he must get away from this place. But how? The place was fool-proof. It had been built to hold prisoners in; not to let them break out from at demand.

"Every problem has an answer," he muttered. "If old Baron Trenck could escape from forty-one prisons, I can surely escape from one."

He settled on his steel cot in apparent apathy till King came down to the hall lamp to extinguish it.

"Can you send a message for me?" asked Brent. "What time is it?"

"What difference does it make to you?" snapped King. "You ain't goin' nowhere. Who's your message to?"

"My lawyer," said Brent. "I have a legal right to see a lawyer, and neither you nor your damned crook of a sheriff can prevent it unless by force, and you'll regret it if you do."

King was in a quandary. "I'll git you some paper an' a pencil," he said. "You kin write the letter. I'll give it to Sheriff Opp when he gits back."

Brent knew that note would never be delivered, but he fought for time. Very vaguely, uncertainly, he had visioned his plan, but while King was getting the paper that plan burst into full flame. That is a trick that plans have. While King was still in the office after paper, Brent untied his big neckerchief and left it loose about his neck. He was standing expectantly by the cell door when King came back carrying a pad of paper and a pencil in one hand and his ring of big keys in the other. He thrust the key-ring into his belt and held out the paper.

"Here. Write your letter," he said roughly. "I'll give the note to Opp.

Hurry up. I don't want to set up all night."

"You'll get more sleep 'n you need tonight," said Brent. He seated himself on the cot and wrote slowly. From time to time King went over to the great main door, opened it, and listened intently to the noises of the night.

"They're sure raisin' hell downtown," he muttered. "Sounds like a meetin' of some kind. I wonder what it is."

BRENT felt sure he knew what those noises portended. By this time Opp would have left town and Ware would be doing his best to arouse the passions of the mob. He had little time to waste.

"All right," he said curtly; "here's the letter."

He moved toward the door and held out the letter. King thrust his hand through the latticed door and held out a hairy paw.

He was suddenly aware of a close grip that tightened on his wrist; then his hand and arm was jerked through the latticed door till his elbow struck the grating. Instantly Brent held that struggling hand with one hand while, with the other, he snatched his loose neckerchief from his neck. The next moment King's wrist was tightly lashed to the grating inside the door. He threw himself back with a startled oath and nearly broke his arm, but the neckerchief did not give. Then Brent's hands shot through the grated door, seized the sweating fat man by the neck and jerked him forward till his fat face pressed against the latticed cagework. The next moment Brent's necktie was passed about King's neck, pulled tight and tied. Almost throttled, nearly purple in the face, his eyes starting from their sockets, the fat man struggled hard. It was no part of Brent's scheme to kill him. The moment he realized that his victim was lashed fast, his hand shot to King's belt, and in a second the key-ring had changed hands.

To fit and turn that key, working from the inside of the cell, took time, but presently the key slipped into place, the wards clicked and the door opened, dragging King, lashed to it by neck and wrist, inside the cell. Instantly Brent jerked his prisoner's belt loose and tied it about his arms above the elbows, then he tore a strip from the blanket and lashed his feet together. Then, opening his knife, he cut every button from his prisoner's trousers, so that the garment fell to his knees, a most effectual way of hobbling a man. Then he untied the necktie and threw King over on the steel cot, where he lashed him fast with strips torn from the blanket, and stood up to admire his work. It was well done. The fat turnkey was as helpless as his worst enemy could wish, but Brent was not yet satisfied.

"I don't want to gag you," he said. "You might choke and I'm not a murderer—yet—in spite of what Opp says."

"I'll promise not to holler," said King warmly, but Brent shook his head.

"You might forget after I've gone," he said. Then, at a sudden idea, he began to laugh. The next moment he jerked loose his prisoner's heavy flannel shirt and, in spite of almost tearful protests, he pulled the shirt-tails above King's head and lashed them fast in a bunch.

"You've got no kick over keepin' your head in a bag of your own shirt," he chuckled. "If you're smothered it's your own fault. Good night."

MOVING swiftly, he opened the table drawer, shook his head in

mild disapproval over a rusty thirty-eight calibre pistol, but stuck it in his waistband and moved down the corridor toward the office, where a light was burning. The office window was wide open and the warm night wind brought a volume of shouts and yells from far down town. Brent cast an appraising eye over the office; helped himself to a rifle from three in a rack, and hung a filled belt over his shoulders.

"I'm beginnin' to feel half-dressed," he muttered. "Hello! What's this?" He moved to a small, square iron safe that stood against the wall. A ponderous key was half way in the lock and the door was unlatched. It was evident that if Opp had left San Simon, he did not intend to remain long absent. Brent pulled the door of the safe open and looked inside. A hurried glance showed old records, letters, and . . . a note-book that bore in great black letters the name "Jas. Opp." A rubber band held it shut, and when Brent hastily opened it a handful of papers cascaded out; a bill of sale for a horse, a recipe for sheep-dip, two sets of pornographic postal cards and . . a single sheet of paper! One glance at that paper made Brent's heart leap. He held in his hand his father's note to J. Opp for thirty thousand dollars, payable on demand, bearing interest at the rate of ten per cent!

"My Lord," he muttered, "was there ever such luck?"

His hands trembled as he held the paper to the light. The note had been written on what was evidently the back page torn from a book. It was not written on a regular note form such as he had often seen. He studied the signature that he knew so well . . . Sam'l Halston! Brent remembered well the peculiar little quirk of his father's final "l" in the name Samuel. He did not like the name and he always abbreviated it. He started to tear that note into pieces, but stopped at a thought.

"By God," he muttered, "I must have fallen pretty low to have even considered destroyin' it as yet. I'm not a thief. Neither is Dad. If he really did borrow that money, then this note stands good. I'll just impound this note till we get a chance to find out if there was money passed. That'll be when Dad is free. Now for the open."

He moved quietly down the hall, passed out into the open and stopped in the shadows of a giant cottonwood tree to get his bearings.

"I need a horse," he muttered. "And there's only one place to get one . . . Down in the town. I've got to drop to horse-stealin', I reckon. Funny how easy it is to get the habit of stealin', once you start."

His heart gave a sudden leap as two men seemed to rise suddenly at his side. Then he realized that they could not have seen him. He drew his breath gently and shrank back between two great roots of the tree. He could not move till they should have gone on. Then a heavy, booming voice was in his ears as one of the men spoke.

"I don't give a damn what Ware says. He kin wash up his own dirty dishes. Why's Ware tryin' to start trouble?"

"He ain't startin' no trouble," said another voice. "You got him wrong. He's tryin' to stop trouble before it starts. He didn't say, 'Take Halston out an' hang him while Opp's away from San Simon.' He said, 'Don't do it.' "

"Yeah. I know. I heard what he said. He come into the bar where we was drinkin' that pizen liquor that'll make a rabbit spit in a bulldog's face, an' he started in to tell us what a good thing fer the County it is that the man

who murdered Fred Winn's been caught. Then he told us that this man Halston's probably crazy like his father. Same kind o' tendencies — homicidal mania, he called it. He said it's a pity this man Halston ain't put away in the old style, 'cause his trial'll sure cost a lot o' money and he may git acquitted."

"Well? Ain't he right? We don't want a crazy man runnin' loose over the ranges. He's a cattle-man, anyhow, and he's got a grievance. He's done killed one sheep-man, Winn. I don't believe in spendin' a lot o' money to do what we kin do fer nothin'. Don't you see the game? Opp's left town to go to see Winn's fambly. This is just the time if the crowd wants to hang Halston. Better see it the way we do."

"Well, I won't. I'm goin' home. Damned if I'm goin' to be mixed up in any lynchin' bee."

BRENT hardly dared breathe till the darkness swallowed up the two shadows as the two men passed on, still arguing.

He was right, then! That was what the shouts and yells from the town meant! He had pretty well believed it before, but now he was sure. Opp had gone away from San Simon on purpose, and while he was away Ware would very carefully stir up the crowd to a lynching. And he was to be the victim.

He had seen the working of that law on two previous occasions and he knew that, while it was perhaps necessary where all other forms of law fail, to use it is like putting a cocked and loaded gun in the hands of an irresponsible person. No one can foretell who will be hurt. His thoughts took concrete form. His first need was for a horse. He must get out to Cincofuentes at once and then back to Sappai Caves.

So this was the result of outlawry! A price was on his head. If he showed himself where men gather, some one would shoot him in the back. From now on till he had straightened out this crooked deal, his life lay in the crook of any man's trigger finger. He must live like a wolf of the hills.

"Bueno!" he muttered. "If that's what they want, I'll show 'em that two can play where three draw cards . . . Ware, Wilton and Opp! With Lammert thrown in as a joker! They feel they've got a fine hand! The old man locked up in the Insane Asylum, Opp gettin' his note for thirty thousand dollars, and Ware sittin' pretty, waitin' to take his damned sheep across the Cataratas and put 'em on Cincofuentes water. That's their hand. Now what's mine?" He laughed a little and patted that note in his pocket. "If I can't draw cards, I can kick the table over and spoil the game. From now on I'll not accept any handicap, either. I'll be as ruthless as they are. I'll fight the devil with fire. I've got a rifle and I've got that note, and, before mornin', if things fall my way, I mean to have somethin' bigger than all else. First of all for a horse."

He headed for the focus of those raucous shouts that were coming from a saloon down by the "tracks." Keeping to the well-defined shadows of the houses, he reached the railroad right-of-way and, taking shelter behind a pile of cross-ties, he settled himself to watch the door of the Last Chance saloon. Sooner or later action of some kind was sure to come.

A dozen horses were at the tie-rack, but he could not see them clearly. He decided to pick the horse on the rail nearest the trail to Suppai. That would give him a better chance at a get-away. Then he heard Ware's voice raised in heated argument inside the bar, and his

whole plan changed. Suddenly his heart gave a great leap as the saloon door flapped open and he recognized the horse at the end of the rack. It was the big, flea-bitten gray that Lee rode! Lee, who was his best friend next to old Ben Livesey. Then Lee must be here! If he could get at Lee, he would have a friend on whose aid he could count.

Men passed in and out of the saloon and still Ware's voice kept on—sharp, incisive, persuading:

"I'm not at all interested," he said. "I only say it's a damned fool trick to let this man Brent Halston come back here from California Baja and terrorize the whole valley. He beat up Opp the day he came. He assaulted Wilton and he killed Winn. and Winn had a wife and five daughters. Who'll support 'em now? Halston's an outlaw. A price is on his head. His crazy father's locked up and this man's likely been bitten by the same bug. He's been livin' for five years among the Mexicans and he comes back here and practises his knife tricks on decent men. Do as you please, of course—it's no business of mine." And through the open door Brent saw Ware pass an open bottle along the bar.

"Damn all the Halstons," a sharp voice shrilled out above the tumult. "It ain't a question of any one man here in this Valley. It's a question of cattle or sheep. They can't have both."

"That's what it is." A dozen voices yelped in approval. "We all own sheep. These damned cattle-men have hogged all the water. Let 'em go to hell."

"It's a good thing Opp's out of town," said Ware. "You can settle it your own way . . . Here's Wilton . . . He can tell you his side of it."

A sudden babble of voices rose and men swore at and contradicted each other. Then the saloon door banged noisily open and a man came out, and Brent almost shouted in sheer relief. It was Lee.

BRENT drifted aside like a wind-blown shadow, rose to his feet and gave a low whistle. Lee knew that whistle. It was a low undertone of a tune that is beloved of many Old Timers along the Border. It has come down from the days of William Walker and Count Raousset de Bourbon, who raided Sonora, and its refrain goes:

"Green grow the rushes oh,"

from which, it is said, is derived the generic title of "Gringoes" that is given to all Americans. At sound of that tune Lee "froze." Then he saw Brent, and in two leaps was standing beside him in the shadows.

"By God!" . . . The cowboy almost sobbed in his relief. "I'm glad o' this. I've been here all day. I came in for supplies, and when I heard they'd got you, I stayed in. I sent word to old Ben. That was late last night. I stayed in here to keep track of things. That damned man Ware 's tryin' to incite the crowd to lynch you. What happened, Brent?"

Brent told him in a dozen words, and Lee nodded. "Got a gun?" he asked.

"Sure. I came down here to steal a horse to get back to Cincofuentes. But now I've changed my mind. Wait here for me, Lee."

Brent whipped out a knife and, before Lee could stop him, he was among the horses at the tie-rack. He moved from horse to horse, but left untouched Lee's gray and the two horses that stood on each side of him.

"All right . . . " And Brent was back as suddenly as he had gone. "I cut all the cinches and reins and stir-

rup leathers on all the horses but three. So they can't follow us."

"Three? We don't need but two. Who's ridin' the third horse?"

In answer Brent took him by the arm and turned his face to the half-light from the saloon door.

"When I made my get-away from the jail," he said. "I had only one thought —to get to Cincofuentes, then back to Suppai and hide again. I've changed my plans, Lee. I'm goin' to do just that, but I'm goin' to take with me a visitor. The man who 'll ride that third horse, if I have any luck at all, is Gilbert Ware."

"You 'll . . . take . . . Ware . . . with . . . you?" gasped Lee. "You're locoed, Brent. He won't go."

"He 'll not have a chance to refuse if you help me. Listen to me. I want the crowd drawn up to the jail. Let 'em think they're goin' to lynch me if they choose. Up in the jail yard there's a big heap of hay that they keep for the horses of the deputies. It's under a shed with a thick sacaton roof. You go on up there, Lee, and stick a match in that hay. A fire 'll draw 'em like a poultice draws a boil. When you've done that, come back to me here as fast as you can. I'll need you."

"Huh! I see! Addin' arson to your other accomplishments." But Lee grinned and was off among the shadows at a run and Brent settled himself to wait.

Five minutes passed and the row still continued in the bar. Once a sharp question raised a hail of oaths; then a coarse word brought a coarser jest and the room rocked with laughter. Suddenly a woman's voice shrilled out, high-pitched and shrill with terror.

"Fire," she called. And again . . . "Fire! Fire!"

That one word is replete with terror at all times in the West, where houses and lives may be snuffed out in an hour. Instantly that saloon vomited forth a hundred men, Nesters, Dry Farmers, —sheep-men were there, with a sprinkling of miners and prospectors, for Opp and Ware had combed three counties to fill San Simon with any one who was not a "cattle-man."

They poured forth from that slatted bar-room door like bees from a tee-hole and for a moment stood astounded as a sheet of red flame ran up the sky.

"It's the jail," shouted Stacey, a big nester. "By God! Somebody's fired the jail. Maybe we won't have to hang Halston! Let it burn."

"Give it a good start," suggested Wilton. "Let's have another drink." And he headed back for the bar, but Ware stood over him.

"Take 'em down there and pretend to make an effort to save the jail and Halston, too," he said. "It'll sound better."

"Come on, all you men . . . " Wilton started down the street. "Hurry up!"

They surged at his heels in a frantic rush for the fire, and in their eager haste they missed Lee returning under the dark edge of the houses whose occupants had crowded to the scene of the fire.

"She's burnin' like tinder," he whispered to Brent among the horses. "What now?"

"That . . . " Brent's hand jerked at the looming figure of Gilbert Ware standing in the square of the door of the now empty saloon. Ware had no mind to follow the crowd and perhaps be caught in his own net. "Wait a minute, Lee. Hold these three horses while I get . . . Ware . . . "

He thrust the three reins into Lee's hands, snatched a couple of the latigoes that he had cut lose from the ruined

saddles, and headed for Ware standing in the saloon door.

CHAPTER XIV

THE OPEN TRAIL

GILBERT WARE stood paralyzed. He could not believe his eyes. This enemy of his who had been safe in jail—loose now and armed! Ware stood like a man suddenly petrified, and in that brief second Brent struck.

In that moment all chivalry dropped from him like a garment. In utter need chivalry is a clog to the feet of him who uses it, but there are certain things that decent men observe even in fight. Brent neither kicked nor gouged, as Ware would certainly have done in like case. Just now the important thing for Brent was to get Ware, unhurt, into his hands.

He came like an avalanche and he dropped on Ware with the speed of the mass of rocks sliding down hill that men fear most in the world. He struck but one blow. There was no need for more. That one blow, struck with all the power of his arm and with the full weight of his hundred and sixty pounds behind it, driven by the hot fires of hate in his heart, caught Ware squarely on the point of the jaw. He went down like a full meal-sack suddenly pushed over. He did not sag or drop. He collapsed in a limp heap, and the back of his head hit the door-sill a resounding blow. Then he lay still.

One quick glance showed Brent that the bar was empty. Even the bartender had gone to the fire in the wake of the hurrying crowd. He wanted to see that crowd stop any attempt on the part of a prisoner to escape from a burning jail. It would be worth talking about later. Brent leaped for the unconscious Ware, jerked him over to lie on his face, pulled his arms behind his back and lashed them securely above the elbows with one of the long, supple latigoes he had with him. The merit of that method of tying lies in the fact that, while the man is helpless, he can still use his hands to a very modified degree, but he can never get loose. The next moment Lee had the three horses at the door.

Thrusting an arm through the reins, he joined Brent, and both of them pulled and lifted and struggled until they got Ware's right leg across the deep saddle. From time to time the restive horse side-stepped, but they got Ware into place. Working swiftly, they lashed his legs to the stirrup-leathers and tied his feet fast with a lariat under the horse's belly, and finally passed another about his body and lashed him fast to cantle and saddle-horn so he could not fall off. At a sudden thought Brent stopped and, pulling off Ware's big neckerchief, tied it fast over his prisoner's eyes.

"When this man comes to," he said, "he must not see who is with him or where he is. Of course he recognized me, but he didn't see you. He shall only know that I have made him a prisoner. We'll go now." And Brent swung into saddle and Lee took the reins of Ware's horse.

"He don't look like he's comin' to at all," he said. "I hope you ain't killed him, Brent."

"He's all right," said Brent lightly. "That kind doesn't die easily. He'll be very much alive when I want to use him. Come on."

Ware's big body sagged to right and left as his horse began to "jig" between the two other ponies as they moved deliberately down the street, crossed the railroad tracks and plunged into the darkness of the open trail. Far

behind them the red flames of the sacaton-roofed shed licked up against the sky and a great blanket of sparks and reddened smoke shot upward. From time to time a shot rang out and a raucous shout rose and swelled and died away.

"They'll waste a lot of time makin' sure that I'm burned up in the fire," said Brent. "There's no need for hurry. After they find the jail is not on fire, they'll want to get at me. Then they'll not be able to get in the jail till they beat the door down. They may even hang that fool of a turnkey by mistake. When they find out what's happened, they'll not be able to use their horses. See?"

ONCE or twice a groan from their semi-conscious prisoner made them glance at him, but they paid little attention. Mile after mile they put behind them in leisurely travel. Green Springs, Palo Verde, Antelope Flat and Seco Crossing dropped away behind them. They had passed beyond the region of the sage-brush, where sheep could graze, and they were mounting the long slope to the mesa beyond which lay Cincofuentes when a deep groan from Ware brought them to a halt.

The man was struggling like a maniac, but those latigoes that held him had been well tied. Dim dawn shot up above the distant ranges as Brent and Lee sat watching Ware's useless fight for freedom. A pearly light stole across the tops of the mesquite brush and a little fog lay like rolls of white cotton along the ground in the hollows. Finally Ware gave up.

"Who . . . ? Who . . ? Who the hell are you?" he panted. "Who's got me?"

No answer! Lee glanced at Brent, who laid a finger on his lips. He had not lived for five years in the wild land of California Baja without learning that silence is one of the best weapons that man can use. Silence breeds uncertainty and uncertainty begets fear, and when fear once enters a man's soul he is like a little child. He can not reason or argue or follow a thought to its logical conclusion.

"For God's sake answer me." Ware struggled again and again till they seemed to hear his muscles crack. The big swallowing muscles at the base of his jaws moved convulsively and Brent, with a grim smile, pointed to the Adam's apple in Ware's throat that was jumping up and down spasmodically. Man can to a greater or less degree control every other symptom of fear but that.

"It's Halston, of course." Ware's voice cracked. "I recognized you! You can't get away with this! You damned murderin' cut-throat, you'll hang for this as sure as there's law in the land. . . . Ah . . . !"

His speech was cut off as Lee, at a sign from Brent, quickly ran a thong of thin raw-hide about Ware's head, forced it into his mouth and knotted it behind his head. That gag does not suffocate, but it is a very real silencer. The morning hush was broken suddenly by the rush and roar of galloping hoofs, and Brent glanced up from their prisoner to see a group of men spurring their ponies in a maddened gallop along the trail that led from Cincofuentes. At the same moment they espied him and swept down on him in a wild rush, and even in that still, dim light he could recognize them. Ben Livesey with Thompson from Cincofuentes was there with Ewing and James and Peters along with men they had brought from their distant ranches. It was clear that Lee's message to Livesey had borne fruit. Brent made a quick sign to Lee to

guard their prisoner and spurred to meet his friends. At three hundred yards from where Lee sat, Brent flung up a hand, and Ben Livesey with his party rode up beside him.

"What in hell has happened?" demanded Livesey. "How'd you git here, Brent? Lee was in San Simon when he heard tell that they'd roped you. What happened?"

Brent told them, and they hung on every word.

"Lee sent word to me at Cincofuentes that you'd been taken and locked up in the jail," said Ben again. "I knowed pretty much what'd happen if somethin' wasn't done at once, so I sent word to Lee to stay where he was till I got the men together. Then I sent word to all the Five Big Ranches, an' . . . they come!"

"Wait! Let me talk." Brent held up a hand and they crowded about him.

"You've got some talkin' to do," boomed Peters. "Is that that man Ware you've got hog-tied in the saddle? Who took him?"

"I did," said Brent. "It was easy enough. I just poked him once and hog-tied him. Just as easy as bull-doggin' a steer. Now, listen, you men! I took a hand in this game and I've drawn cards. I think I've filled my hand with this man Ware. The main thing is this . . . Follow my lead. Don't any one of you speak a single word before this man Ware. I'll keep him blindfolded so he can't see any man. I'm the only man he has seen, and it don't matter about me."

"Lessin sent word, too, that they had taken you prisoner," said Ben. "And then Lee's message confirmed it. Give us the details now."

THEY had failed to grasp the full significance of his earlier tale, but now they listened eagerly. When he told how he had silenced Fatty King with his own shirt-tails, Peters roared with laughter.

"He's probably been smothered to death," he said. "I know he's got only one shirt . . . But . . . listen to me, Son; are you sure about this lynchin' game?"

"That's exactly it. You men don't seem to have grasped the magnitude of the stakes this man Ware's been playin' for. He and Opp were playin' for big stakes. If they win, every cattleman in this whole Valley 'll be ruined. Ware and Opp mean to have Cincofuentes. If they have got it fair and square, that's one thing. If, as I think, they're tryin' damned crooked methods to get it, then that's different."

"Go on," growled James, whose eyes suddenly became red. "What 're you goin' to do?"

"I don't think you'd better know what I mean to do," said Brent. "I'll tell you this much, though. I mean, first of all, to get my father free by a legal process enforced in a damned illegal manner. When that's been done, I'll apply to you for aid. Right now I want a word in private with Ben Livesey."

"Sure. We understand." And Peters drew his party aside.

"Ben"—Brent laid a hand on the old foreman's arm, and his eyes gleamed—"Ben, I had a bigger stroke of luck today than I had any right to expect. When I got out of that *juzgado* . . . jail . . . I found Opp's safe was open. I looted it and found that note. That thirty thousand dollar note that Opp claims Dad signed. I've got it, I tell you."

"Let me see it," said Livesey hoarsely. His eyes followed every move as Brent pulled out the envelope and spread out the note for his inspection. "That's

The men looked up in surprise as Ethel came up to Marks, who was still scrutinizing the note. "I should apologize to you for interrupting, sir," she said, "but I think what I have to tell you is of some importance."

sure old Sam's hand-o-write," he said glumly. "I'd know it anywhere. Tear that note up," he said fiercely. "Tear it up, I say. A note can't be recorded. Tear it up and see if they dare bring suit on verbal testimony, even before Judge Lammert. Tear that note up."

Brent shook his head and replaced the paper.

"We're not thieves, Ben," he said. "There's only one man who can positively say about that note, and that man is . . . Dad. If he really did borrow thirty thousand dollars from that man Opp, it must be repaid, of course, even if we lose Cincofuentes in paying it."

"You're a damned fool," said Livesey hoarsely.

"I know I am. I'm exactly what Dad and you made me. Listen, Ben; when Opp gets back and finds that I have escaped and the note is gone, he'll put two and two together. He'll be crazy mad. He'll look in two places for that note. Their whole plan hinges on that note. He'll try to get me, and, failin' that, he'll find some way to search Cincofuentes. Neither you nor I must have this note. We must find some other place to hide it.

"Put it in a safe-deposit box in the bank, then," said Ben.

"That'll never do," said Brent. "Lammert will at once have a search of the bank made. I'm goin' to ask Ethel Gordon to keep it for me. They will never suspect her of having it. I'm sure she'll help us."

"You'd be still surer if you knew how she's pestered the life out o' me about you," said Ben, still wrathy that the note had not been destroyed. "If you ask me, I'll say she sure is takin' a big interest in Cincofuentes since you came back."

"She's interested in cows, I reckon," said Brent, flushing.

"Huh. Or a calf," grunted Ben. "You take that note over to her yourself."

"I will—at once. Now, listen, Ben. Here's what I want done. I want Lee and one other man to take this man Ware over to Suppai Caves and keep him there till I come. They will keep him tied, gagged and blindfolded. He must not know where he is nor who has him. See?"

"All right. What then?"

"That bunch of sheep-men and the men Opp and Ware brought to San Simon need only a leader to make them dangerous. When Opp gets back he's sure to start something. Can you sort of hold that gang off for a bit till I make my getaway?"

"What have you got to do?"

"I want to send a man to Cincofuentes for a horse, a pack-mule and some supplies. Most of all—and this is most important for my plan—I want a green raw-hide. I want some paper, a bottle of ink and some pens. Don't forget them. They're important. Send one of the men to get those things, pack them on a pack-mule, and join me at the Gordon house as soon as he can. In the meantime use these men to keep the San Simon men off my trail. *Sabe*, Ben?"

"I'll be damned if I do," growled Ben. "But I can carry out orders without understandin' 'em."

He called Masters aside and spoke in a low tone, and five minutes later Masters passed back over the trail at a gallop.

"Now, Perkins"—Brent drew him aside—"you were in this at first. Do you want to help Lee?" Brent explained his need and Perkins grinned. "Be sure Ware does not hear a voice nor see a man," cautioned Brent as he waved Lee forward. "Take him to

Suppai Caves and keep him there till I come."

"He's sure tied up good," muttered Perkins after a brief glance at Ware. "All he needs is a little sealin' wax on him and a 'Not to be opened till Christmas'."

He waved at Lee, who started Ware's horse off on the trail to the Northwest. The big man bobbed helplessly in the saddle and great tears of anger and mortification ran down his face. No one said a word till the three figures dropped out of sight behind a ridge; then Roberts spoke:

"Young fellow," he said, "I'm not askin' your plans. I'm just takin' you as a leader in this. You seem to have figgered it all out. What we want to do is to save the Valley for cattle, and the whole thing hinges on Cincofuentes water."

"Right." Brent straightened up in his saddle. "I'm savin' Cincofuentes water for us all—if you all do as I say. There's only one thing can tip our hand now."

"What's that?"

"I'll explain that later. Just now I want you all to ride in to San Simon. You're not supposed to know I have escaped, so you can pretend you think I'm in jail and have come to protect me. See? You'll be there ostensibly to uphold the law. You'll be the law-enforcers. That gang of Opp's men 'll figure as the law-breakers. If Opp turns up, he will have to side with you. If you get your hands on him . . . hold him."

"IF I get that ——— ———" Peters voiced an unprintable name—I'll hold him like a wolf-trap. All right, son! We'll play her as she lays."

"Who in hell invented sheep, anyway?" asked some one. "I heard a song about 'em once. It went:

"Baa Baa Black Sheep! Have you any wool?
How 'n hell do I know, Maa . . .
Sheep is such a fool . . .
Got to have a dog to drive
To the place to drink.
How 'n hell kin I tell, Maa
Fogged in such a stink."

"Come on, men. We'll head for San Simon!" And Ben Livesey lifted his pony with spur and rein and headed down the trail while Brent turned off on the trail that led to the Gordon place.

It was high noon when he reached the house and his hopes were just as high. Ethel might almost have been waiting for him, she appeared so quickly.

Fate, that never does things by halves, ordered that Ethel's back should be to the sun and that her red-gold hair should form a nimbus about her face in which her eyes showed blue and gold, with the little golden sparks that one sees in the "matrix" of the West. Long before the pony stopped, Brent was out of saddle.

"You knew I'd come when I could, didn't you?" he asked.

"I . . . I think I did . . . I have always known that, I think," she said gravely. "But tell me all that has happened."

She backed up against the well curb and tried to wrench her hand from his grip, but she did not try hard enough to succeed. Finally she desisted and let him draw her to him.

"Did any one tell you that I murdered that man Winn?" he asked.

"Pshaw! Why mention such a foolish lie? Someone said so. I think I heard it from young Wilton. I knew better. You didn't make a name in California Baja to throw it away here. Tell me what really did take place."

Never before had Brent Halston understood the perfectness of the English language. In five minutes he had explained, and his explanation left her gasping, and holding to him with both hands.

"You . . . you mean to tell me that those men . . . Ware and Opp, Wilton and Lammert have all conspired to bring about this evil thing?" she whispered.

"I think Lammert and Wilton are just weak fools who got caught in Ware's net," he said. "Ware and Opp are the two I have to reckon with. You believe me, don't you?" His arms were about her shoulders and she made no resistance as he drew her closer. In actual hours they had known each other something less than a week, but his words recurred to her: that time should be recorded "by heart-throbs, not by figures on a dial."

"Believe you?" she said. And she laughed. "Of course I believe you."

"Then . . . keep on believing and keep this for me." He handed her the envelope and told her what it was. "It's the note that Opp says my father signed. I do not believe it. But only Dad can tell the truth about it. I'll ask you to keep it for me till I get Dad out."

"Oh! It's . . . it's simply too horrible." Her hands flashed to her face. Then suddenly the world stood still and all the planets seemed to be breaking about her in catherine wheels of sparks and flames. She was in his arms and he was kissing her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she said. "What can be the end of all this miserable affair?"

"This? This isn't miserable." He grinned at her. "Here comes Fate in the person of my pack-mule, and all my hopes wrapped in a raw-hide. I must go now. Keep that note safe for me till I send for it."

Weeks clattered up with the pack-mule and shook hands warmly.

"If you need any help, just let out a yell," he said hopefully.

"Thanks. I don't." Brent wilfully misunderstood him. "I've made out pretty well alone so far. *Adios!*"

He tossed a clove-hitch of the lead rope over his saddle-horn and, without any *mauvais honte,* held out his arms to Ethel, who just as frankly came into them and held up her face for his kiss.

"*Valgame Dios* . . . Go with God," she said gravely, and he headed off across the mesa with something in his heart as near to the Peace of God as he had ever known.

CHAPTER XV

THE TORNILLO DE CORAMBRE

BRENT'S heart and hopes were high as he cantered along the trail with the pack-mule loping at his side, but he realized that the most difficult part of his task yet lay ahead of him. Suppose he had made a wrong estimate of Gilbert Ware! With that price set on his head, he could not set about his business in the open. First of all that outlawry must be recalled or Opp, or any one of Opp's men, might kill him before he could get his work done.

His thoughts turned to Gilbert Ware, now his prisoner in Suppai Caves. He would like to have had Opp a prisoner, too, but that was not possible at present. He must use Ware and he must, in handling him, be absolutely ruthless. If he failed to have his will of Ware, his entire plan would fail; his father would be doomed to spend his life in a pauper's cell, and he himself would

lose life and . . . Ethel! Most men do their very best work because of a woman, and at thought of Ethel his heart gave a great leap and his plan hardened into cold determination.

He turned into the head of the canyon and worked slowly up the long slope that led to the lip of the Caves. Lee heard the quick, sharp jangle of the pack-mule and met them. He slipped the *aparejos* off the mule and nodded toward the inner central cave.

"Everything all right?" asked Brent in a low tone.

"Fine. I warned Juan not to speak a word where Ware could hear him. That man Ware is just about half-crazy. We took the gag out of his mouth and I fed him, so he knows someone is here, but he does not know who it is. He sure did try to talk while the gag was out. Old Juan's riding herd on him right now."

Brent took the raw-hide from the top-pack and passed into the middle cave where Juan was cooking a pot of beans, with occasional venomous glances at Ware, who, gagged and blindfolded, hands and legs tied, sat against the wall. Brent strode over and with no gentle hand turned him to face the light, and the sight of two great tears stealing down Ware's face somewhat appalled his captor. Final realization of his utter helplessness had sunk at last into Ware's brain. He was wholly at the mercy of this man Halston. He knew what he would himself have done had he been in Brent's place! Brent saw those two great tears and for a moment his heart softened. Then at a thought it again became steel. This was no time to be soft.

"Cryin' like a baby, eh?" he jeered. "Of course you know who I am. I'm Brent Halston. I'm going to settle things with you, Ware. You're cryin' now! You'll be sobbin' right out before I'm done with you." He untied the gag and freed Ware's mouth. "I have a few words to say to you," he said, "and you'd better listen carefully because I will not say it twice."

Ware gulped. "For God's sake take this damned bandage off my eyes and let me see the light," he pleaded. "I'll give my word of honor that I'll not try to escape or to injure you."

Brent merely laughed. "Five years ago," he said. "I left here and I went down to California Baja. Life is very hard down there, Mr. Ware. You'd not believe how hard it is. It's even harder than it was on our own Old Frontier, where men died mighty quick and where life was cheap. When I left here my father was rich and prosperous. He had neither ill health nor bad habits.

"I CAME back here and I found that during my absence you had become a power in the land. Before I went you were just a damned, dirty crooked gambler. I find that you own fifty thousand sheep that you can't get water for. You bought Opp's election as sheriff because you needed him. You paid Wilton to enter suit for Five Springs, though you knew then, as you know now, there is no basis for that suit. You bought Judge Lammert. You used your bought tools to have my father declared insane, and you had Lammert appoint you my father's guardian. Then, as his guardian, you propose to trade off Cincofuentes to Opp in exchange for an alleged note for thirty thousand dollars, so that you can later get the Springs from Opp."

"Your father did sign that note," said Ware protestingly.

"I'll come to that later. I'm summing up now. Shut up. I want you to see that I know every card in your

hand. You got me charged with a murder that Opp committed and you got me outlawed and put a price on my head. You tried to stir up your own mob to lynch me. I heard that myself. That's about all, Mr. Ware. Just ask yourself one question . . . What do you imagine will happen to you now?"

"I . . . I . . . I'll agree to whatever you want in reason," quavered Ware. "Only tell me this . . . "

"You promise too easily," said Brent, laughing harshly. "You have no idea what I can do. I can promise you one thing, Mr. Ware. That you will never forget this little visit to me. Did you ever hear of a little thing called by the Mexican Indians *el tornillo de corambre?* No? I didn't think you ever had heard of it. The words mean merely, 'the raw-hide vise,' but it is really much more than that. Raw-hide, green raw-hide, slackens off when it is wet. When it dries it contracts very closely. I once saw away down in California Baja an Indian who was put to death in a very peculiar manner. He had broken some tribal law. He had not sworn a man insane or stolen a rancho; his offense was merely some offense against tribal custom. They put a collar of green raw-hide about his neck and placed him in the sun for some hours. It took more than five hours for that collar to shrink. For five hours that poor wretch lay there praying for a death that would not come. His eyes were bulging out with ingested blood, he was laboring for breath that the collar cut off, his heart throbbed and beat at his chest and his arteries seemed about to burst. It was five mortal hours before death came to him. The death he prayed for.

"Feel this, Ware." He thrust the rolled-up raw-hide under Ware's bound hands. "That's a green hide. I brought it here for your special benefit. I feel sure that this raw-hide will make you see the error of your ways."

HE cut a thin strip from the hide, passed it about Ware's left arm above the elbow and tied it tightly till it sank into the flesh.

"I'm going to leave that on you till tomorrow," he said. "By that time its action will have convinced you that I have spoken the truth."

"I . . .! I believe you," panted Ware. "Look here Halston! I . . . I'm damned sorry for what I've done. But I haven't done all you said! Most of it was Opp. If you'll only turn me loose and let me get back to San Simon, I swear I'll straighten it all out as you'd like it done."

"Don't worry about that," said Brent. "You're going to do all that without being turned loose. If you don't . . . Well honestly, Ware, I don't like to consider the alternative. You can make up your mind to one thing. That you will do my will without trying to bargain with me. If you do not, you will only regret it once but that will be forever. By the way. You spoke about that note that my father is supposed to have signed for thirty thousand dollars borrowed from Opp. I have that note, Mr. Ware. I got away from the jail, looted Opp's safe and found the note."

"I . . . I . . . My God, man! . . ." Ware's voice cracked in the intensity of his emotion. He knew that Brent told the truth about rawhide and its qualities. He knew that drying hide contracts like steel. He had once seen a piece cut a stick in two pieces. He knew what it would do to flesh. "Take this damned hide off my arm," he begged. "There's no use torturing me to get a thing that I'll give you without it."

"You're not half as willing as you will be tomorrow," said Brent with a

chuckle. "It's time for you to be fed. Open your mouth."

The utter shame of being helpless and treated like a kennelled hound smote Gilbert Ware. In all his life he had never believed that such a thing could be possible. Never before in his life had he demeaned himself to beg as he had just begged Brent Halston. But he was hungry and thirsty. Every bone in his big body ached and he was living in darkness for that bandage across his eyes shut out all light. Gilbert Ware, the rich sheep-man who coveted Cincofuentes, who owned a judge, a sheriff, three doctors and fifty thousand sheep, was glad to open his mouth and to be fed by his mortal enemy.

That night passed with leaden feet for Gilbert Ware. He could hear men moving to and fro so he knew that he and Brent were not alone. Once that fact was established his broken pride began to recover. But the hopelessness of his situation struck him even more forcibly. If he could not escape from one man, how could he escape from several? He rolled and tossed from side to side trying to free his eyes of the bandage. Once he almost succeeded but a heavy hand (It was Lee) jerked his head back till his neck cracked, replaced the bandage and vigorously slapped his head. Then Ware, cuffed like a disobedient child, suffering in mind and body, broke down and wept openly.

His lower left arm throbbed like an engine. He could not see it but he knew that the flesh was puffed and black above the raw-hide ligature and dead white below it where all circulation had been cut off. The arm ached like a raging tooth and cold tremors raced to his shoulder.

Grey dawn crept into the cave but Ware only knew it by the dawn-smell. Then Brent's voice was in his ears as his fingers felt the rawhide ligature.

"It seems to be doing its work," he said. "Six hours more of it and the arm would have to be amputated. Gangrene would supervene."

WARE flinched openly and Brent went on cheerfully:

"Well? What's the good word? Are you ready to obey orders you dog?"

But Ware had regained a little of his lost nerve with the sudden loosening of that ligature. As the blood sought its accustomed channels he got back a little of his effrontery that had made him master of Vargas County.

"Just exactly what do you want of me?" he snarled.

"Ah! We've got over our weepin' spell have we?" Brent's tone was silky. "You've got back your early morning courage have you and you'll dictate to your owner will you? You want to bargain? All right. I'll bargain with you. Just remember what I said last night. I tell you what you will do. If you refuse to do it, you pay my price for refusal.

"First you will write a letter to Judge Lammert. You will order him to do several things. First. He will personally see that within forty-eight hours after he receives your letter, my father will be released on a medical certificate approved by Lammert setting forth complete recovery. Second —You will direct Lammert and Opp to recall the notice of outlawry against me and revoking the offer of a reward. Third—You will direct Lammert to dismiss his injunction forbidding Cincofuentes to wire the Five Springs and you will direct him to stop all your sheep at the passes in the Cataratas."

"Oh! I'm to do all that am I? And what else?" snarled Ware.

"You'll direct Lammert to have the

District Attorney take steps to look into two murders that Opp has committed. That man Winn said Opp killed him. Five men on Cincofuentes were present when Winn died and heard his ante-mortem statement. The other killing I personally saw. So did Dr. Nevins. We were both present when Opp, without any justification, shot and murdered an unarmed man. He was an ex-sailor from the Navy and his name was 'Jay Wing.'"

"Great God . . ." Ware shivered in his bonds and cold sweat gemmed his face.

A long silence fell!

That silence was broken by a gasping, choking gurgle as Ware strove with his bonds that cracked under the strain.

"Are . . . are you lyin' to me, Halston? As God is your judge tell me the truth! Who was the man you say Opp shot?"

"He was a stranger in San Simón," said Brent. "We didn't know his name at that time. He got into a game of poker with Opp and some others and Opp cheated him with marked cards. The man threw his cards in Opp's face and Opp killed him. At the time we could not identify him but there were tattoo marks on his arms that showed he had been a sailor on the United States Ship Daphne. Lessin got in touch with the Navy Department. The man had the letters 'J. W.' tattooed on an arm. He was identified by the Navy Department by tattoo marks that were entered on his Service Record. Why? What is it to you?"

"Oh Christ! I was hopin' and waitin' for him to come back! Are you sure? Sure, man? By God, if you only tell me the truth, I'll forgive you all."

"The hell you will! I suppose you'll forgive me for what you and Opp have done. That's kind of you. Who was this man that you're so interested in him?"

"He was my son. . . ! My only son," said Gilbert Ware. Then his great shoulders shook and tears ran down his face.

FOR a moment Brent felt a great twinge of regret for the man pull at his heart strings. He had never seen such acute physical grief. His first instinct was to loose Ware's hands, to give him horse and rifle and let him go to pay his debt to Opp. Then it came home to him like a blow in the face. Justice to the living was more important than revenge for the dead. But he was sorry for Ware.

"I didn't know you had a son," he said. "I'm sorry. But the murder of a stranger was nothing to you. Opp could kill anyone he felt like killing till he happened to land on some one who was kin to you."

"He was my only son," said Ware again. "He took his mother's name because he got in trouble and wanted to get in the Navy. They'd not let him enlist under his right name. It seems they'll never let a man enlist who's done time. That's how it was. He had a game put up on him. He was due back here and I had all my arrangements made. I was plannin' to put him on Cincofuentes."

Those words hardened Brent's heart.

"I see," he said. "As soon as you could steal Cincofuentes and murder me, you'd give it to your thieving son. Too bad to disappoint you, Ware but . . . Now about that letter to Judge Lammert."

"To hell with you and that letter," said Ware dully. "I'll never write it. Not a word will I write."

"Oh yes you will," said Brent evenly. "I'll be with you in a minute." He rose and Ware heard him across the

cave; then he heard two voices in low-pitched talk. Brent said something to a man who replied in a slurring speech. Then Brent came back. He forced Ware to his haunches and the big man felt a wet, cooling bandage being tied about his forehead just above his eyes. It was cool and damp and gave some relief.

"When you're quite ready to write that letter, just let me know," said Brent. "I warn you, Ware, you'd better make a prompt decision. It's a lot easier to write while you can still see." He tied the wet bandage in place and Ware felt the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise. He dully wondered what this meant. Then a voice that he had not heard and could not identify came to him. That voice was the voice of a Mexican and he spoke in Spanish that Ware spoke as well as he spoke English. The voice was husky, full of terror. It trembled and seemed to break.

"Senor," it said: "Indeed you do not realize what this means. You are no Indian, Senor. You can not do this thing."

"He will write that letter or lose his eyes," said Brent. And at those words Ware's blood ran cold.

"Mira, Senor . . . Listen, sir . . . *Por amor de Dios! Su ojos hueran como uvas* . . . For the love of God! His eyes will pop out like grapes. It is the *Tornillo de corambre . . !*"

"He can save his eyes by writing what I have told him," said Brent coolly as he turned away.

He moved quickly to the cave mouth and sitting there in silence watched Ware intently. For a few minutes no change was apparent in the man's face. Then big sweat drops formed and ran slowly down the creases from nose to mouth.

"Senor," said Juan's voice imploringly: "You can not do this thing. In a short time it will be too late. The damage will be done. In a short time as it dries, that bandage will tighten and shrink and sink in till its pressure will force the eye-balls from their sockets . ."

"That's his lookout. He can save his eyes by writing that letter."

Ware could hear the muttered reply and his heart failed him.

IF he refused to write that letter, he would lose his sight and he could never have his revenge on Opp who had murdered his only son. Opp would never be called to account. For fifty years Gilbert Ware had worked his will on weaker or less fortunate men who came under his heavy hand. It was hard for him now to bend to a grip even more ruthless than his own. For an hour he sat there, hunched up his bound hands clawing futilely at space. longing for freedom. The pressure of that wet bandage increased! He knew it was slowly drying. His parched and feverish skin was absorbing the moisture from the raw-hide. Its pressure would slowly increase now with every hour. Already it felt like a band of warm metal as it took the temperature of his feverish head. Five hours Brent had said! . . . In five hours he might be sightless . . .

"Oh, God," he groaned. "Take the damned thing off. I'll write."

He felt Brent's hands go to the ligature, then it was removed. The bandage over his eyes was slacked off and, with eyes that puckered at the unaccustomed light, he blinked like an owl in sudden daylight.

He had never heard of Suppai Caves. He knew practically nothing of this land to which he had come as a stranger from the land North of the Cataratas but he knew instinctively that

Brent must have found a secure refuge here.

"Here," Brent thrust some paper at his prisoner with a pen and a bottle of ink that he took from the pack. "I'd advise you to make it just as strong as you can. Your eyes depend on the success of those letters."

"Untie my hands."

"Not necessary. You can sit sideways and write at an angle. You'd better hurry. I'm not very patient. You can tell Lammert anything you choose. I'm not going to censor your letter."

Ware knew from that, that his captor did not fear pursuit. His heart hammered at his ribs and his whole body ached and pained. Never in his life had he written so much at one sitting or had written his fears and terrors so fully. As he finished each page Brent took it and read it carefully.

"I think you will impress Judge Lammert," he said. "If those letters do not move him nothing will."

"He'll do what I have told him," said Ware.

"Let's hope so for your sake." He gathered up the papers, put them in an envelope and placed the bandage back over Ware's eyes.

"You might spare me that," groaned the unfortunate victim. Then he sat suddenly erect as he heard the quick shuffle of shod hoofs at the cave entrance. That was Juan going with the letters though Ware did not know it.

"I'm not trying to save you anything," said Brent. "Those letters are on their way now. It's a good thing for you that you wrote them. By the way. Just to show the superiority of mind over matter, I'll show you something. Look at that."

He pulled the bandage from Ware's eyes and laid before him a damp, folded handkerchief that was still warm.

"What's that?" demanded the prisoner. "I don't understand."

"That's the raw-hide that was to squeeze your eyes out," said Brent. "That's the *tornillo de corambre.* If I had put that raw-hide on you it would have ruined you in five hours. I'm glad I didn't have to. You thought it was raw-hide. You believed every word I told you. A wet rag tied about your head made you believe you'd lose your eyes unless you wrote that letter. Incidentally, it's well for you that you wrote that letter. Let's pray that Lammert carries out your orders. When you get free, if you ever do . . . you'd better learn to play poker, Ware. Right now I'll side-line you again for safe-keeping."

Then Ware heard a fire crackling and dropped off in an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VIGILANTES

THOSE next three days were the longest that Brent Halston ever spent. With so much at stake now, he dared take no risks. Much as he desired to see Ethel, it was dangerous to be abroad until that offer of a reward for his death should be recalled. He would not move now till he got word from Livesey or from Lessin.

Juan left the Suppai Caves and gave the letters to Lee who fled to Cincofuentes with them as straight as a scared coyote runs. He was closeted with Ben Livesey for an hour and when the old man came out of the office his face was red and his eyes were blazing. He held the open letter in his hands.

"That boy is a peach," he said to Lee. "It must have took some coaxin' to git Ware to write that letter. To

bring Ware to heel's no light job."

"I heard once of a suckin' dove," said Lee. "I never seen a dove suck none but Ware sure acted just like a suckin' dove is said to act."

"I'm goin' in to San Simon," said Livesey suddenly. "You'd better come with me. This is Lessin's job from now on."

They found Lessin in his office. He read the papers without comment till he had read the last least word; then he leaped to his feet and seized his hat.

"Come with me to Lammert," was all he said.

They found Judge Cecil Lammert in his office. He was a tall thin man who had been told once that he looked like Henry Clay and ever since that day had tried to look and dress the part. Unfortunately for him, falling under Ware's hand as a judge, he was soon bound hand and foot to his captor by the strongest bond in all the world . . . Debt. He took the letters that Lessin handed him and read them carefully and his hands shook.

"What . . . What . . . I don't understand this!" he began weakly.

"You'd a damned sight better understand it right quick," snapped Lessin. "It's a quit-claim notice Lammert. That's what it is. Ware is a prisoner in the hands of the man he has injured, young Halston. If you don't liberate old Sam Halston at once you know what'll happen to Ware. He's told you. Gilbert Ware will not thank you for the loss of his eyes. Believe me Judge, you're in one hell of a fix. You'd better do what I say. I'll have Sam Halston out of that place on a writ of habeas corpus that even you can't fail to recognize. If you love life you'd better start."

"But . . . But this is intimidation," protested Lammert.

"No it ain't!" Liversey thrust a heavy six-gun under Lammert's nose and spun the cylinder. "It ain't no intimidation nor it ain't no threat. It's an honest to God promise. If Sam Halston ain't out of that place in ten hours you'll never see another sun rise."

"That goes fer every man on Cincofuentes," said Lee quietly.

"More 'n that," Livesey got the floor again. "You damned fool. Don't you see what's what? This here thing means civil war between sheep and cattlemen unless this action is taken. You were a good clean citizen, Lammert, till Ware slung his harness on you. This is your chance to git clear of Ware. The men in this Valley mean to live by the law but by God! It's goin' to be the law they make. Not the law made by a dictator like Ware and executed by you as his judge. I tell you the first sheep that blats its way down the Cararatas starts merry hell in the Valley. There's only one way to stop it! Stop this damned dirty mess right now. If Sam Halston ain't out in ten hours, I'll send word to Brent and let him git to work on Ware."

"I'll—I'll see Nevins at once," said Lammert suddenly. "I'll get something done at once."

"You'd better be damned sure your foot don't slip," said Livesey sharply. "I'm on the prod now."

CECIL LAMMERT knew well enough what that meant. In this case it meant that old Ben Livesey had been driven to his last trench and would come out fighting. Lammert knew the symptoms.

"I'll meet you at the hotel at six o'clock," he said hastily.

Lammert must have worked hard that day. His fright was evident. He knew that Ben Livesey once started, feared neither man nor devil. He appeared at

the hotel promptly at six to find Livesey, Lee and Lessin waiting for him.

"Samuel Halston was released an hour ago," said Lammert. "He'll be home on the early train tomorrow. Is that all?"

"It's only the beginnin'," said Ben. "Where's Opp?"

"He's due back tonight," said Lammert. "Why?"

"You'd better tell Opp," said Livesey. "That the man he murdered in the bar of the Last Chance was a man named Jay Wing. He was Ware's only son. Ware has just learned that Opp killed his only son. I don't like Opp but he ought to be warned. The District Attorney'll be after him too for the killin' of Winn."

"Good God," groaned Lammert: "Once I thought a judgeship was a fine quiet, sedentary place where one could study and rest on his laurels."

"Laurels is damned poor beddin'," quoth Livesey. "You kin bank on one thing. You're sure to have a killin' bee when Ware meets Opp and it's only fair to warn Opp. But he ought to have been killed long ago. Where is he now?"

"I heard, mind you this is only report, I heard," said Lammert; "That Opp came back from Winn's place. He found that man Halston had escaped. He went up into the Cataratas to bring those sheep down into the Valley."

Livesey let go a vitriolic oath.

"You knew it all along, you sanctimonious, bible-backed crook," he said. "Have you given Opp a title to that water? To Cincofuentes?"

"The title is in escrow," said Lammert weakly. "Just as soon as Opp turns in the note, he gets the title. That was arranged by Mr. Ware."

Livesey drew a breath of relief and Lessin grinned. So far the title was safe. Then with a muttered oath, Livesey drew Lee aside.

"You hike out of here," he said. "Get back to Cincofuentes. Send word to every cattle-man in the Valley to come right away to Cincofuentes with all the men they've got and tell 'em I say to come heeled. If Opp starts them sheep across the ranges, sure as hell we'll have trouble."

After Livesey saw Lee start he went back to Lammert. The facile judge was plainly worried. If he saved Ware, he was giving Ware another hold over him. If he failed to save Ware both Ware and the cattle-men would be on his trail.

"Right now," said Livesey: "You see Ellis, the printer. Tell him to run off a hand-bill recallin' that charge of murder against Brent Halston. We'll see Ellis right now."

Ellis, a busy little man, grinned happily at the order for the handbills.

"I'll have 'em run off in an hour," he promised. "The paper goes to press in twenty minutes. You'd better publish notice of the withdrawal of the reward for Brent Halton in the paper. The whole State'll know it in a few days."

"Run it," said Livesey shortly. Then he turned to the down-cast Lammert. "You ain't comin' out o' this mess with head an' tail up an' steppin' high," he said. "I'm meetin' Sam Halston at the train in the mornin'. D'you know, judge, if I was you, damned if I wouldn't find somethin' mighty pressin' that'd take me out o' the State till things get ironed out. If I was you I wouldn't be hangin' around when Ware and Opp meet old Sam."

THAT was good advice and Lammert knew it. When he had gone, Livesey and Lee sought the hotel bar. But not much liquor was drunk that night;

too much was at stake. Both men realized that the future of the entire Valley hung in the balance. Those big ranch-owners had faced five years of drought and low prices with the confidence of their breed. They had built up their ranches in times of prosperity and, believing in the future of the land, they had pledged and borrowed, pinched and saved, hoping and praying for better days. Now those days had come but along with them had come Gilbert Ware with his innumerable flocks at his heels. Every man in that Valley knew that Gilbert Ware would prove to be the first of a swarm if Cincofuentes water was open to sheep. Still . . . Had Sam Halston signed that note? If he had, then they had no case! If that note was good, their cause was lost!

Seven o'clock found three men waiting at the dingy little station. Lessin had joined them at breakfast. The train jerked to a stop and the three stood silent as Sam Halston quietly got off the sleeper.

Their intended warm greetings died into silence as they faced him. His usually warm eyes were as cold as steel with a curious little glint in them that foretold hell for some-one. His lips were set in a straight line and his leonine head was up. He nodded quietly to the three.

"Well, I'm back," he said curtly. "I'll not forget this, boys. I know the ropes well enough to know that it took some engineerin'. Tell me this. First of all I want to know who did this? Who could buck Ware an' Opp an' Lammert?"

"Brent," said Lessin. "I call him The Man From Baja. He's at the bottom of it. Livesey you tell him."

They headed for the hotel, Livesey talking rapidly and Sam Halston weighing every word.

"Get a room and have some coffee sent there. Something's got to be done at once and we've got to decide what it is to be."

"First of all. What happened to you?" demanded Lessin.

"Not much to tell," said Sam. His teeth gritted and his jaw thrust out. "You know how I came to be where I was. Well, I had just about given up all hope of ever gettin' free when yesterday the Superintendant sent for me and told me I was discharged as free. Said I am 'cured'! Cured hell! By God! I'll cure some one yet. That man Hyde, the Superintendant is a decent man. I blame Gilbert Ware, Opp and Wilton."

"Sam," Livesey leaned across the littered table and his voice was thick, "Sam, answer me this. A whole lot depends on your answer. Did you ever borrow any money from Opp and give him a demand note for thirty thousand dollars? Think well, man."

"Think hell," said Halston. "Of course I never borrowed money from Opp. Sign a note? I never had to. If I'd wanted money I know a dozen places I could get it. Where would Opp get that much money anyhow?"

"From Gilbert Ware most likely," said Lessin. "Are you sure about not having signed that note, Sam?"

"Of course, I'm sure. What's all this mean? What's been goin' on?"

"Good Lord man! You can't expect us to believe you don't know." They stared at him in disbelief so apparent that Sam grinned.

"How would I know anything?" he demanded sharply. "I was never allowed to see a paper or to talk to any one except to attendants. Oh they were exceedingly courteous. When I asked one man about the ranch he told me one day that they were forbidden to talk with patients on subjects that were

connected with their—their hallucinations. It's a damned fine system."

"You listen to me, Sam Halston," Lessin grabbed him by the arm and almost hurled him into his chair. "Listen to me, Sam, and thank the Lord for Brent."

THE morning was well gone when Lessin stopped talking and old Sam Halston sat astounded. Most of what Lessin told him was pure news to him.

"The first thing for us to do," said Livesey, "is to get out to Cincofuentes. Ewing and Peters with their men will be there. Now that Lammert has withdrawn his injunction about the Springs, there'll be a new source of trouble. Those men will have to be shown. Lee, you go to Brent at Suppai Caves and tell him to bring Ware at once over to Cincofuentes. We still have the matter of that note to settle and we must round up Opp too."

The three men headed back for Cincofuentes in the buck-board and Lee turned off on the trail that led across the wide mesas to Suppai.

Brent was watching for him and the news of his father's freedom was like drink to him. It was not so pleasant to Ware who sat in a heap wondering what more could happen to him. From time to time he cursed inwardly as he realized how Brent had outwitted him. He might have known, he thought, that Brent would never dare carry out the threats that he had made. The man felt physically ill. His personal troubles were enough to engage his every thought but there was more. His brain seemed to crack under the strain as he realized that Opp, his own right hand man, his best tool, Opp, the man he had bought into office that he might use him as Sheriff! Opp who was to share Cincofuentes with him, had killed the only human being for whom Gilbert Ware felt any love. His only son! If he could only compass a terrible revenge that would bring to Opp just a portion of the misery and grief and pain that he himself was undergoing, he felt that his life would be well spent. He kicked and squirmed to attract attention and Brent removed the gag.

"I'll pay you twenty thousand cash to free me and give me a chance at Opp," gasped Ware.

"I'm takin' you on a personally conducted tour to Cincofuentes," said Brent. "My father is there and so are the cattle-men of the Valley. You may find it an interesting event. They'll be glad to see you."

Ware heard the horses shuffling about the cave, then he was half-lifted, half-thrown into saddle where he was tied fast. Then Lee and Juan got their ponies and slipped down into the canon where Brent joined them with Ware riding beside him. He drew Lee aside.

"You and Juan take this man to Cincofuentes," he said. "Be careful Lee, that he does not get away. We're due for a show-down soon. I want to see Miss Gordon and get that note that she's been keepin' for us. We'll want to confront Ware with that note."

"Why?" asked Lee. "What's Ware got to do with a note to Opp?"

"That's exactly what we want cleared up before a crowd. Don't let anyone untie Ware or even unblind him till I get to Cincofuentes. He must be kept where he can't exchange a word with any one or see any one."

"Bueno." Lee took the reins of Ware's horse and the three men took the Cincofuentes trail while Brent headed off for the Gordon house.

His dust-cloud, high and thin, drew Ethel's eyes and she was at the gate

when he rode up. At sight of him a flood of color ran up her face and her eyes were starry as, swinging out of saddle, heedless of a world that seemed to stand still, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

SHE listened eagerly to what he had to say and when he told her how he had compelled Ware to write the letter to Lammert she laughed softly.

"You see, Sweetheart," he said. "It's come to a show-down now. If that note that I gave you to keep for me is genuine, we will have to raise enough money to pay it off. We can't lose Cincofuentes. My mother is buried there. And we're not going to have this Valley over-run by sheep if we can legally prevent it. Will you get me that note?"

"At once. Listen, Brent. You told me I might examine that note. I opened it and looked at it. I . . . I . . . I think I'll ride with you if you don't mind, to Cincofuentes."

"Better and better. I'll saddle your pony while you get the note."

In five minutes she was back, flushed and colorful, and joined him at the corral and a moment later, stirrup-to-stirrup, they turned into the main trail that led to Cincofuentes and were off at a gallop that never faltered till they topped the last grass-clothed ridge and looked down at the house among its grove of ancient live-oaks.

"Look at the horses," said Brent quickly. "The whole world must be here." He pointed to a group of saddled ponies as they swept along the trail that led to the home corrals.

Livesey's messengers had done their work well and five different brands showed on the horses at the tie-racks. A score of men sat on the corral bars and loafed in the 'dog-run' that connected house and kitchen, talking in muted tones with long intervals of silence. A few men looked up and nodded unsmilingly as Brent helped Ethel out of saddle and turned their ponies loose.

"I gather that the big chiefs are making medicine in the medicine lodge," he said grimly as they walked up the steps.

The big front door was open and a rumble of voices came from the cool, darkened interior of the great dining room.

"By gracious!" Brent's hand dropped from Ethel's as they entered the hall, "Look at the hats. It's a Gathering of the Clans. It looks like business. Here's Lee."

Lee grinned at Ethel who held out a hand and he turned to Brent.

"I got here an hour ago with Ware," he said. "All the Valley men are here. Livesey got here with your father and told 'em all that's been done. They're only waitin' for you. Seems kind o' like the old-time Vigilantes that we used to hear about. They mean business, Brent."

"Hi, Brent . . . " Peters came into the hall and stopped at sight of them. "You've come just in time. Six of us here have resolved ourselves into a Committee of the Whole to decide what's got to be done."

"Well. Go on," said Brent quietly. "Of course, if we try this man Ware it is not a legal court and we must keep within the law. If we make one fool step, the law will be broken and if that happens the way things are in this Valley right now it means war."

"That's why Sam can't sit with us," quoth Peters. "He's an interested person. This thing, whatever is done, is goin' to be done without fear and without favor. Even Ware shall have a square deal."

"That's just what he's afraid of,"

quoth Lee. "What's all that fuss about outside?"

He stepped out upon the porch as a sudden babel of voices rose and fell, then raised voices in hot argument came to them.

"Sure it is. Think I don't know? Gallopin' horses throw high, thin dust-clouds. My God look at 'em come. They ride like cavalry . . ." said a voice.

"Have sense man! There ain't no cavalry in the whole State. Where would cavalry come from? But they sure do ride like men carryin' the mail. Haste! Post Haste!"

A HIGH, thin cloud of red dust lay along the tops of the mesquite bushes. Then, rising and falling, seen through that cloud they saw a line of heads like black beads on a red background, then galloping horses shouldered aside the dust-wreath as a line of horsemen swept up the trail at break-neck speed.

Ben Livesey, summoned to the porch by the uproar, stepped back into the hall, picked up a rifle and dropped it into the hollow of his arm as he came back on the porch. He took one glance at the on-coming men and let out a yell that brought every man to his feet.

"You men stand fast," he shouted. "Not a man raises a hand till I give the word. That's your new Sheriff Opp and he's got about twenty deputies along with him. He never suspected we'd have a meetin' here. He thought he'd ketch us unprepared. Stand by! No man moves till I say the word."

Opp with a score of hard-bitten, dark-faced men at his heels, crowded into the space by the corral. They jerked their horses to a halt and waited for Opp to speak. Opp rode forward but the sight of old Ben Livesey, rifle on arm, the light of battle in his eyes, every line of his figure tense with expectation and hope made even Opp hesitate.

"I . . . We . . . I rode out here to see you about some matters that've got to be straightened out," he began lamely.

"That's good," said Ben with suspicious geniality. "There's quite a lot o' things that may have to be pulled straight—with a rope. That's what we're here for. Send your men over there by the water-troughs and you stay there with 'em till we send for you."

Sheriff Opp took one look at old Ben Livesey and went.

CHAPTER XVII

BOWIE'S WAY.

BRENT stepped back into the hall and glanced into the dining-room where the leaders sat at the long table. He knew all of those men, though some he had not seen for years but he knew that that gathering represented the best in the Valley. Men were there who, as boys, had taken part with their fathers in standing off the Indians in some sudden foray; men who had tracked and trailed and fought and hunted over every mile of that Land of Little Water. They loved that land with all her unkindness and hardness. She was their land. Yes . . . Brent drew his breath hard as he looked down the lines of impassive faces at the table. These men would certainly give justice. But it was not probable that that justice would be very greatly tempered with mercy. In silence he watched them shift from seat to seat till each man found a chair he liked and Ethel, standing at his shoulder, caught her breath in an audible gasp.

This was Frontier Justice such as she had read of in fiction. What did these men mean to do? How could they take

back into their own hands the execution of that law that they had trusted to Sheriff Opp? Ethel Gordon did not yet know that occasionally there comes a time when, after continual abuse, men must take the execution of law into their own hands. It does not always result in impartial justice but it is a great purge and a cleansing fire. The same offender does not as a rule commit his offense twice!

"Bring in Ware," Masters rapped for silence. "Lee, bring in the man."

Lee, evidently prepared in advance, almost thrust Ware into the room. His arms were freed, his face had been washed and his clothing straightened but his whole demeanor showed the strain under which he had been living. Penned up, bound, in the distant kitchen he had heard the quick rush of Opp's men but he had no idea who it was. He only knew that alone and unarmed, for Lee had long ago secured his pistol, he was at the mercy of these men for whose ruin he had striven. He was a prisoner in the house of Sam Halston, the man he had mortally injured in money, in property and in pride and that last is the worst of all. Ware was frankly afraid and the sight of those impassive faces about the table did not reassure him.

"Lessin, I believe you are to act as public prosecutor. What do you allege against this man?"

"First of all Sir . . ." Lessin rose in his place . . . "I wish to say a word about the conditions that make this action necessary. We have found that no law nor justice can be administered in this County while Lammert is judge and Opp is Sheriff. This man Ware has suborned both. He owns them both. Recall is impossible in this State. A vote of the entire body of the legislature can not be had for six months. This matter to be laid before you will show its own weakness. I accuse him first of bribery. That is he holds a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage on Lammert's house. That means that he owns Lammert's soul. I accuse him of champerty. That is he paid Wilton money to be used to bring suit for Five Springs, well knowing there were no grounds for suit. He wanted to get those Springs thrown into court. Then he instigated Wilton to take action charging Sam Halston with shooting at him and alleging Sam to be insane. That is he alleged that Halston was insane. Ware got Lammert to decide in Wilton's favor. He had Halston committed as insane and then got Lammert to appoint him guardian for Halston's estate. He has arranged with Sheriff Opp to have Lammert give a court title to Opp for this ranch of Cincofuentes in exchange for a note for thirty thousand dollars held by Opp that he says Halston signed. When that is done Five Springs is to be thrown open to Ware's sheep."

"HOLD on! What proof is there of this?" demanded Ewing.

"I'm coming to that. Lammert told me that he has already made out a court title. It's in escrow in the bank to be turned over to Opp the minute Opp turns over the note for thirty thousand dollars."

"Wait a bit . . .," Marks voice cut the hush. "Let's get at this systematically. If you bring in Brent Halston, you'll get the story all in proper sequence."

Brent was introduced and duly sworn.

"Now go on," said Lessin. "Tell the story your own way and don't omit any details."

With Ethel Gordon's eyes on him, Brent told every detail. He told how he had come home; of his meeting with Livesey and of the man who was shot

in the bar-room. He told of his first meeting with Ware, of the talk between Ware and Opp that he had overheard. Of what he had been told about his father's incarceration. He took them step by step over the trail to Suppai Caves and told of his capture, of his escape and how he got the note . . . At that a great grunt came from Ware who gave no other sign. When Brent told how he captured Ware, the big men nodded and when he told how he made Ware write to Lammert a broad grin ran around the table.

"That's a new one on me," quoth Marks. "What was it you called that thing that was to squeeze his eyes out?"

"*Tornillo de corambre,*" said Brent quietly. "You know how raw-hide contracts."

"I do. Tell us this, if he hadn't given up, what would you have done, Son?"

"Let's not consider that," said Brent. "I was playin' to win. I had to teach old Juan to lie a little, but in the main I stuck to the truth. I was playin' to win and I won."

Marks nodded. He could understand that. "Let's see that note," he said. "The whole thing hinges on that note."

Ethel, seated near the door, handed an envelope to Brent. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright as Brent took the note and handed it to Marks who studied it carefully.

"That is surely old Sam's signature," he said with painful slowness. "Better get old Sam in here and see what he says."

Sam Halston, waiting in the hall of his own house that might not be his in a half-hour, came in with an ominous smile on his face. Ware seemed to collapse like a telescope at sight of him.

"Sam," Marks handed him the not, "please examine this note. It is for thirty thousand dollars and it is claimed that you gave this note to Opp in exchange for cash. It has apparently been signed by you. Tell us what you know of it."

"I don't know a thing about it," said Sam Halston. "I never even heard of it till yesterday. I never signed that note."

"Ware says you did. Opp said you did, too."

"Then they're both liars," said Sam. "I never had any occasion to borrow so much money. If I had, I'd have gone to the bank or to one of you all. I'd never have gone to a damned sheep peddler."

Man after man nodded grim approval at that and one or two looked up in surprise as Ethel came up to Marks who was still scrutinizing the note.

"I should apologize to you for interrupting you, Sir," she said: "But I think what I have to tell you is of some importance."

"I am sure it will prove important enough to justify such an interruption," he said courteously. "Please sit down."

"IT is about this note," she said breathlessly. Her eyes gleamed and her face was flushed at this undesired publicity. "Brent Halston is . . . is . . . is a very dear friend of mine. So is his father. My mother and I have lived here for two years and we have never experienced anything but kindness and courtesy from Cincofuentes . . ."

"Yes . . . Yes . . ." Ewing leaned forward. "Every one in the Valley has had similar experience, Miss Gordon. But what has this to do with this note? The whole matter hinges on that note."

"Brent asked me to keep that note for him because he knew and I knew that when Opp and Ware knew that Brent had it they would not stop at murder to get it. They would never

suspect me of having it. Brent said I could examine that note if I chose—and I did."

"Go on please."

Every man at that table was leaning across it staring at her and Gilbert Ware felt his heart sink. What new disclosure was coming now?

"If you will examine that note," she said, "you will see that it is written in blue ink on a paper that is the back page of a printed book. Down at the bottom on the back of the note appear the words: "Entered according to Act of Congress. Then it gives the date."

"That's right," Ewing nearly tore the note in two trying to confirm her words. He looked up and nodded agreement.

"Observe the date on the note please. It bears interest at ten per cent and it is dated *a year before the book was published from which the paper of the note was taken.* Oh, don't you see? That man Opp tore out a page from a book and wrote the note. He didn't notice the tell-tale date on the paper. *That note is forged.*"

Almost as one man they leaped to their feet and several chairs crashed against the wall. Then they crowded about her while Lee, with a pleased grin, fingered his six-gun and glanced covetously at Ware.

"By God! She's right . . . ," Lessin seized the note and examined it. "I had missed that entirely. That proves definitely Sam's statement, if it needed proof for us who know him, that he never signed that note. That note is a patent forgery."

"Yes. That's all right . . . But . . . Who did it?"

"Who? Who was most interested?" asked Brent coming forward. "Ware and Opp of course. Have Opp brought in here," he said sharply. "He's with his men over by the water-troughs. Get him and make him tell the truth . . . what ails Ware? He's fainted," he said sharply.

That news of Opp's presence that he had never suspected acted on Ware like a blow. He quietly collapsed in his seat. When he came to he found two men holding him while Opp, dark-faced and furious, close-herded by three men, stood at the end of the long table.

"What the hell do you men think you're pullin' off?" he demanded. "You're no court. I'm the duly elected Sheriff o' this county. If any legal steps are to be taken, I'll be the one to take 'em."

"First of all then . . . " Lessin was on his feet shouting. "Make him account for the murder of Fred Winn at Five Springs. Opp stabbed Winn and he died. I'll produce five men to whom Winn said that Opp stabbed him."

"I . . . I...That's a damned lie..." Opp stepped back and his hand moved slowly but Ewing seized his hand and bent his wrist till the bones cracked.

"You try that just once and I'll kill you like a mad dog," he said. "Go on Lessin."

"Moreover I charge this man, Opp, with a deliberate murder when he shot and killed an unknown man in the barroom of the Last Chance in San Simon. A dozen witnesses saw it. Brent Halston here saw it. Doctor Nevins tried to treat the man."

"WHO was he?" asked Ewing. "Was he ever identified? The first thing we've got to prove in case

of a murder is the *corpus delicti,* to show that a murder was actually committed. Who was the man? Was he ever identified?"

"Yes," said Lessin: "The man had tattoo marks on both arms that enabled us to have him identified. He had the letters J. W. on one arm with the words U.S.S. Daphne. That told us he'd been in the Navy. The other arm bore a girl's head and the name Elena with the word OHIO. The Navy Department secured complete identification for us: I have copies of the records."

"He was Gilbert Ware's son," said Brent quietly. In the sudden silence the big men's breathing sounded loud.

"My God," said Ewing sharply.

Opp staggered back. His face was wet with cold, clammy sweat and his eyes were dazed. He stared from man to man and then his eyes sought Ware.

"That's a damned lie," he said shrilly. He did not recognize his own voice. A sudden chill, the chill of death, lay across the room but no man spoke for a long moment. Ethel gave a quick little gasping cry and shrank up against Brent who promptly slipped an arm about her and held her close. Sam Halston alone stood like a graven image and his eyes never left Opp's face.

"Ware," said Marks dully; and the finality of fate was in his voice: "You've heard what's been said here. Did you have such a son?"

"I did...," Ware rose uncertainly and stood waveringly on his feet, "He enlisted in the Navy under the name of Jay Wing. That was his mother's name. From the statements made by Lessin and that damned crook Brent Halston, I can't doubt that the man Opp murdered was...my only son..." Then before any one could suspect what was coming, he broke down.

"Oh, for God's sake," he shouted shrilly in a broken voice that no man could recognize as wholly human, "I'll tell you about the note. The girl is right. I wrote the note but I didn't sign it. Opp did that. At least I think he did. He either did it himself or else he got some one else to sign it. I don't know who signed it."

"Then you gave a spurious title to Sam Halston's ranch that was to be swapped ostensibly for that note that Opp either forged or had some one else forge. You used your power over Nevins and Lammert to have Halston committed to an asylum as insane while you administered his estate. You wanted Five Springs for your damned sheep."

"Put it your own way! Who the hell cares?" snarled Ware. "Haven't I paid in the loss of my son? All I ask is, whatever you do to me, don't let that murderer Opp go free."

"You can both count on justice," said Marks quietly. "Sam . . . " He turned to his old friend. "Are you satisfied to leave this whole matter to us? To abide by our judgment?"

"I'm satisfied," said Halston: "But I'm a long way from bein' content. That's different. What about that note? That's the nubbin of the whole thing. What about that note?"

Ewing took the note and held it up. A series of nods answered his unspoken question as he tore it into a score of pieces and threw them on the floor.

"That ends the note," he said. "But we're no closer to justice 'n we were before. What do you want done?"

"Put it to a vote," said old James sharply. "That's the way we always used to do. If you all can't remember the kind of justice our fathers gave, I can tell you. Both these men are tarred with the same stick. Let's hold a full caucus on 'em and decide what to do with 'em. Every man in the Valley is interested. If these two get away with a double murder and theft and forgery then we're plumb ruined. Get our own men together and let 'em vote what they want done with these two. Me? I say give 'em a fair trial and hang 'em."

WHEREAT a chuckle of quiet mirth from Ewing made more than one man grin.

"I'll call all the men inside," said Peters. At his summons they crowded into the great room and stood silent while he explained what had been learned and what had taken place.

"I suggest," Livesey got the floor, "I suggest that we take the pair of 'em to the new silo and lock 'em up there till we decide what we're goin' to do. See that they have no guns."

Ware was already without belt or holster and five pairs of eager hands stripped Opp in spite of his protest.

"Better send word to Opp's men that if they raise a hand we'll clean 'em out lock, stock an' barrel," said Ewing.

Opps' men took the message quietly. The sight of these big men; all men of standing in the Valley, convinced these newly made deputies that Opp's reign was over. The twenty or more armed cow-punchers from the Valley ranches, who clearly only sought a pretext for a row, bade them walk carefully. They gathered by their saddled ponies down by the long watering troughs and waited in silence as Ware and Opp, escorted by six men went down to the new silo. It was built of heavy masonry, circular in form and entrance was had by a low and narrow door. The two men were thrust inside, the door was closed and locked and Matthews, a Cincofuentes rider, rifle on arm, sat outside the place.

"We'll not be twenty minutes," said Livesey hopefully as he started back for the house.

It took much longer than twenty minutes. First of all every man of Opp's deputies were summoned and in no uncertain terms were given an ultimatum.

"Neither Opp nor Ware owns a foot of land in the Valley," said Marks, "I don't care what you all do but some of you had better get on up into the hills and stop Ware's sheep. We can't and don't want to stop sheep from grazin' on the Free range. That's open to every one. But there is no free water in this valley. It's all on private lands or leased land. You can't water sheep here without trespass and every range is posted. If you try waterin' your damned sheep on private water you'll have some dead sheep. That's about all. You can do as you choose."

They gathered about their horses waiting in sullen silence to get word of their leader's fate. What would these men do with him? Surely even these men were not in earnest when they spoke in quiet tones of what ought to be done.

Brent drew Ethel aside. "Let's get out into the garden," he said. "There used to be a lovely little summer-house there that my mother loved. You'll love it too when you come to Cincofuentes."

She slipped a hand into his and they started down the hall for the back-door when Matthew's sharp hail came to them in a muffled shout:

"Ben," he shouted: "Livesey! Ben, I say! Come here quick! For the love o' God, come down here..."

The utter terror in his voice sent a chill to their hearts and three men dashed for the silo where Matthews, who had flung the door of the silo open, leaned against it sick and faint. He waved a flickering hand at the dark interior and the three men forced an entrance while one man struck a match. The heavy sour smell of fermenting forage hung there like a garment and on the earthen floor, their left wrists lashed together with a belt, lay the prone figures of Gilbert Ware and Opp. Ware's long knife, clutched in his right hand stood hilt-deep in Opp's throat but Ware's head had been nearly separated from his body by a sweeping cut.

"MY God! How they must have hated each other! A knife duel in the dark with their left hands tied! Regular old Bowie fashion...!" Old Man James took one look and turned away. "I've heard my father say that was how the old knife-men settled their arguments. God how they must have hated each other," he said again.

"Why wouldn't they hate each other?" asked Livesey. "Opp killed Ware's son and Ware had evidence that would hang Opp."

"What is it?" Brent shouted. "What's the matter?"

"Killin' bee in the silo. That's all. It's all over."

Ethel shuddered at the lightness of the tone but she knew now that these men, no matter how rough they might appear, lived decent lives and loved the decent things of life and were trying to surround their own people with the decent surroundings that come with law and order. She slipped a hand inside Brent's elbow and drew him to the porch.

"Let's go inside the house," she said. "I...I can't stand any more."

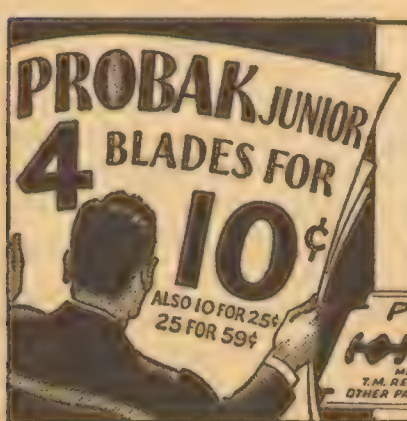
"You don't have to," said Brent gently. "That's what I came from California Baja for!"

"What?"

"To take care of you all the rest of your life...and mine."

Then Sam Halston came out upon the porch, looked searchingly at them and suddenly departed hatless but smiling. As he left he closed the door.

THE END



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The Claws of the Cat

They Are Sharp, But They Can Be Pulled . . . If You Are Careful

By L. R. SHERMAN

THE firing squad took their time reloading. The band of ragged Mexican outlaws seated near them started to jabber as bets were made and accepted: on which way the next victim would fall, or whether or not he would beg for mercy, try to escape, or, like the other gringos, die cursing defiantly.

Buck McKettrick, his face a gray, expressionless mask, glanced along the line. Two of his men were down. Shorty's head was thrown back, as he looked up with sightless eyes at the canyon wall against which he had stood. Steve's supple body was curiously twisted.

Dumpy would be next. His jaws were clamped, his squat body braced as for a shock. Suddenly he began to curse softly.

The jabbering stopped. A sharp command was followed by the crackling discharge of rifles. Dumpy's curses choked in his throat as he slumped like a sack of wet meal. Three down. Only Chuck and Lanky left. And Buck McKettrick saved for the last, not as an honor to a brave leader, but to be the victim of some special form of deviltry, the dessert of El Gato's feast of death. Their arms were bound at their backs. Their feet were free, an invitation to attempt an impossible escape.

McKettrick looked toward Chuck. He was the youngest.

"Steady, son! Take 'er like a white man," he barked.

The command came too late. With an inarticulate cry Chuck began to run down the canyon. He was very young. A rifle barked. He struggled on, twisting, zigzagging, buck jumping. More reports! He kept going. McKettrick switched his glance to the ragged gang. Most of them were watching Chuck's hopeless race with death, but a few had leveled their guns at Buck and Lanky. Buck's glance caught Lanky's steady gaze.

"Not a chance. We c'n try, though," the tall ranny offered.

A scattering volley jerked Buck's glance back. Chuck was down and his feet were drumming a tattoo. A single shot! The drumming stopped.

"Too late," Lanky drawled. "See you in hell."

Buck noticed that the cadence of his chewing had slightly increased.

"Ah, *bueno!* An' now d' Long-legs nex'. Maybe he have something to say, eh? Maybe if he beg a leetle we let heem off. Or maybe he like to pray—*Sí?*"

From the front of the seated group a slender man arose and stepped forward. Even the grease and dirt smearing his clothing failed to conceal the richness of the fabric or hide the gold lace that embroidered the velvet bolero and high-crowned sombrero, loot from

The two guards rushed in, the hammers of their carbines clicking back. From within came the heavy report of forty-fives, and the two guards pitched forward, their carbines dropping to the floor.

some raided hacienda south of the border. His sinuous approach proved him well named—*El Gato,* The Cat. The feline smile on the dark features indicated something of the pitiless nature of this much hated and greatly feared breed of the Santiagos. Neither Mexican, Oriental, Indian, nor American, their combined blood in his hybrid veins carried the worst traits of each. He halted before the two, his black eyes glinting with triumphant laughter.

"Weel you not speak d' las' word, Senor Long-legs? Have you nothing to say?"

Lanky's jaws ceased moving.

"Yeah—this!" There was a strangled note in Lanky's voice.

Buck looked at him quickly. Lanky's lips were working, pursing themselves. His cheeks were bunched. He tilted his head back suddenly and let fly a long stream of tobacco juice that deflated his cheeks. The aim could have been no more accurate had he been glancing along the sights of a rifle. The stream arced flatly, centered the bridge of the breed's nose, and splattered over his entire face.

With a howl of pain and rage, El Gato dug his knuckles into his eyes. He stamped his feet and screamed curses. Lanky resumed his masticating and, though his jaw line was a little white, a faint gleam of satisfaction showed in his narrowed eyes.

THE firing squad awaited El Gato's command. He did not give it. His squinting, inflamed eyes finally distinguished Lanky's form. With breath whistling betwen clenched teeth, he moved swiftly forward. His right hand jerked out a pearl-handled revolver and its muzzle was jammed into Lanky just below the chest.

Buck took a swift step and swung his booted foot. There was a crack as the high heel connected with the breed's jaw. El Gato's gun went off in the air as he dropped like a pole-axed steer.

"Thanks, Buck! But I reckon you only stuck another burr under your own saddle."

The guns of the firing squad were whipped to their shoulders. Buck and Lanky braced themselves for the shock. McKettrick's jaw muscles stood out in bunches. Lanky ceased chewing.

"Carajo! Basta!"

Another Mexican, a squat, broad-shouldered, pock-pitted peon, apparently El Gato's lieutenant, had sprung to his feet as he rapped the commands. The rifles were lowered and the man faced Buck.

"The *Jefe* maybe now have other plans for you two. We weel wait an' see."

Buck looked down at the man who was emptying a canteen over El Gato's face, then glanced along the line of lifeless forms. Four of the little band gone. Only his partner and himself left. And soon they, too, would join their comrades, their work undone, their mission a failure.

His mind flashed along the back trail. The savage, ruthless raids by El Gato and his gang on Buck's and Lanky's Diamond K spread, and the murder of two of his punchers. The capture and hanging of one of the rustlers, where his body would be a warning to El Gato. In swift reprisal, the capture alive from a line cabin of Billy Dorgan, little more than a boy, and the return of his naked and bloody body, lashed to a Diamond K pony. A knife had cut patterns in his white skin, and it had not been done after death, as the bloody scores and torture-twisted features announced.

The gathering of the punchers and the useless hunt for the savages. The return to find that the cunning El Gato

had burned the ranch buildings during their absence. And then the final attack while the exhausted punchers slept. The escape of six out of eleven to a hide-out where they nursed their wounds, and dedicated themselves to revenge.

The guerilla warfare that followed, with El Gato swinging back toward his nest deep in the Santiagos. The flight of the renegades, with El Gato himself as a lure, drawing the six into this canyon trap where there had been no slightest chance to either fight or escape.

A movement of El Gato's head brought McKettrick's mind back to the present. The breed had opened his eyes. At first they were blankly opaque. Gradually they cleared, focused, and the black fire that sprang up in them told McKettrick the breed was beginning to remember. Buck returned the stare, his own eyes slitted, while ice seemed to form in the pit of his stomach.

He was remembering the details of young Dorgan's slashed body. As plainly as if The Cat had voiced his decision, McKettrick knew that a quick, merciful death at the hands of the firing squad would never satisfy this breed's overpowering blood lust.

El Gato waved the peon away and arose shakily to his feet. He stood, feeling the lump on his jaw, his jet black eyes never leaving his two prisoners. Finally he began to chuckle softly, and no screaming, harpy laughter could have embodied the chilling menace of that chuckle.

HE swung around suddenly and barked orders in a rattle of Spanish. The renegades jumped to obey. Some of them disappeared through the bottle-neck opening of a pocket behind them. Others came forward and gripped the two prisoners. Those who had gone into the pocket drove the horses out. Buck McKettrick and Lanky were ordered to mount. Their ankles were lashed by ropes stretched beneath their horses' bellies and their hands were fastened to the saddle horns. With the two prisoners in the center of the column the band headed on up the canyon.

"Looks like a long, tough trail," Lanky drawled.

"Guess I made a haywire play. You'd been out of it now, if my foot hadn't slipped. We won't die in bed, anyway."

"Unless it's maybe a bed of ants."

Before he could reply Buck's attention was switched to El Gato. He had halted and called a half dozen of his ragged following to him. He issued orders in low, quick words and the six raced ahead of the column. As they left the leader glanced toward his captives and the exultant flash of his teeth brought a sudden, deep-chested curse from Lanky.

"Looks like those hombres riding ahead know th' answer," Buck offered.

For once the long waddie had no reply ready.

Throughout the balance of the afternoon and far into the night the band wound its way ever deeper into the Santiagos. Canyon and valley, bench, ridge, and high mesa were traversed. Only when they reached a narrow valley watered by a splashing mountain stream did they halt for a few hours of rest.

Their ankles lashed and their hands tied behind them, the two captives were allowed to rest as best they could. Three guards stood over them, and these men never once relaxed their vigilance. They were taking no chances that the two gringos escape. They knew their chief; they had no stomachs for the punishment he would inflict if they failed in their duty.

Daylight found them again on the trail. There had been no sign of the six who had preceded them. Once

again they entered a canyon, bisected by branch gorges, curving and twisting until only an occasional glimpse of the sun over the towering walls, as they entered a stretch which allowed its beams to reach the canyon floor, told them the direction of travel.

"No blasted wonder neither th' rangers nor any of us ever found The Cat's hide-out. Bet this leads clear to the bowels of hell," Lanky offered once.

"We're still alive." Buck's reply was beside the point, but it indicated that his natural resilience to defeat, his instinctive habit of fighting even after his last cartridge was gone, had reasserted itself once more.

Lanky only grunted cynically.

IT was late afternoon when the gorge they were following suddenly widened into a sloping, walled valley watered by a meandering stream. Groves of cottonwods covered the valley floor and the slopes were thick with aspens and poplar. Near the center of the valley was a double row of log cabins, some of them old and dilapidated, but most of them in good repair, and a few comparatively new. Several, because of their size, showed themselves to be storehouses. One was a saloon.

A bunch of renegades, who had not participated in these last raids of El Gato, as well as Mexican women—some of them young and a few still pretty—came out to meet the returning band. A confusion of chattering and laughter arose on all sides.

"Old Home Week," Lanky offered.

Suddenly, at a sharp command from the leader, there was silence for a moment. El Gato rode back to his captives, his lips stretched in a sinister smile, his black eyes glinting with unholy laughter.

"And here's where we feel the claws of The Cat," Buck's partner drawled as El Gato halted before them.

"I find, Senors, that we are not quite ready for to celebrate. Though your place ees prepare' for you, there have not yet been collect' quite enough of the leetle entertainers. To keep you from worry' about what ees to happen later, we weel now show you where you are to stay while you are weeth us, when eet ees finally ready for you to occupy."

Neither Buck nor Lanky replied. At a gesture from El Gato the column again moved forward. It was a triumphal march down the single street of the village, with those who had not accompanied El Gato on this expedition moving beside the column. Some of the women, the younger ones, were silent. Others jeered and a few threw refuse. One old crone hobbled close and spat. Her aim was poor. A ragged boy stepped forward with a knife. He aimed a quick stab at Buck's thigh. Before the point sank in a tall young Mexican, with less of the brute in his face than the others, slapped the youth away.

When they reached the last house there was a halt. Buck and Lanky were ordered to the head of the column. Close to the front of this cabin, in a flat, open space, was a rectangular ridge of fresh dirt.

"Buried alive," Lanky breathed.

McKettrick shook his head. "Not so simple as that, I'm afraid. Listen!"

For a moment the chattering of their escort quieted, and in that brief spell of silence a queer rustling and squealing came to them from the center of the rectangle. They looked at each other, but neither spoke. El Gato, standing on top of one of the piles of dirt, gave a command. Two of the men dismounted and unfastened the captives' legs and hands. Guns were leveled on them until they had dismounted and had their hands once more lashed behind their

backs. As they were led up the ridge of fresh dirt, The Cat addressed them.

"Senor McKettrick, and you, too, Senor Long-legs, come forward and give a look. I have said there are not enough of the leetle entertainers. Eet would be too bad if they were so few that they would be no longer hongry while there ees still living food for them. We mus' be sure. More are being secured. By tomorrow morning, for sure, there weel be enough, and they weel be hongry enough to be very entertaining —to myself and my gallant band. No?"

Still grinning, he watched his two captives' faces closely as they were shoved up the ridge and looked down. McKettrick ground his teeth as his lips went white and his jaw muscles bulged. He made no sound. Lanky drew a long, slow breath, and choked a curse just before it was uttered.

AT their feet a rectangular pit about twelve feet deep and nine by fourteen feet in length and width had been dug. At the bottom of this, scurrying around, some trying ineffectually to scale the perpendicular sides, others squatting and looking up with their beady, black eyes at the faces above them, still others searching for nonexistent food, were more than two dozen giant rats. When two inadvertently drew close to each other, they whirled face to face and there was a savage squealing and baring of yellowish, rodent teeth.

"Of course, we would not be so cruel as to put you down among our little friends with your hands and feet bound. You weel have a chance, too, to entertain us. I have decided, so that my hongry little friends also have a fair chance, that you weel be naked. Eet might make the feenish come a leetle more quickly, but eet weel make better sport. About fifty more of the biggest and leanest we can find should be sufficient. No?"

The soft purr of El Gato's voice was interrupted by a squeal as two of the rodents engaged in a vicious battle. One of the guards threw a clod of dirt at them and they separated, scurrying to opposite ends of the arena. The Cat laughed softly.

"That you may have a small taste of what ees to follow, we weel let you res' for the night in a cabin where there are a few of theese hongry fellows. An' to give you something else to think about, I tell you now, when eet weel do you no good, that in our last raid we did not run off what remains of your big herd. They are still on your range. Tomorrow night, when they are without an owner, we return to take our time and drive them all south of the border where a buyer ees already waiting."

A stream of commands in swift Spanish followed. The guards whirled the two prisoners about and shoved them down the ridge of dirt. El Gato followed, chuckling. Though he had failed to elicit any vocal expression of horror from the two, he had not failed to detect the white lips and clenched jaws of Buck McKettrick, and the ashen color of Lanky's cheeks as he drew in his slow, whistling breath. The tip of a red tongue passed across El Gato's lips as if in anticipation of the sport awaiting him.

Lanky was swearing under his breath as they were thrust into the deserted cabin close to the edge of the pit. Four of the guards followed them into the single room. One stooped and tied their ankles. Then, without warning, their feet were knocked from under them.

As they crashed to the floor Lanky's curses became more audible. One of the renegades laughed jeeringly. Lanky halted and drew up his knees. He

straightened his legs with a jerk and the laugh changed to a howl as the Mexican sat down and began vigorously rubbing his shins.

Another man entered, carrying two four-foot lengths of lariat. He jabbered some instructions, and in reply to them the two captives were rolled to opposite walls. At intervals of about six feet along each wall heavy staples had been driven deep into the logs. One end of each four-foot strip was fastened in a staple and the other to the cords binding the captives' wrists.

"That ees so you cannot roll so your backs will be close to each other an', maybe, untie yourselves. El Gato ees clever. *Si!*" one of the guards stated.

With the two fastened to opposite walls, the guards carefully examined the cords binding them, and went out. Apparently the place had been used as a prison before. The staples fastened at intervals along the walls, the door barred on the outside, and the absence of any window, tended to indicate this. Though the logs were old, the cabin was tight. The place was black as night. Only a thin crack at the bottom of the door showed a streak of daylight.

For some time neither man spoke. Each was testing the lashings that bound him, and each was learning that he could barely move his fingers, that there was not the remotest chance of loosening the fastenings, or doing anything to ease the cords cutting into his flesh.

Lanky rolled over and looked toward Buck, though he could not see half way across the room.

"What a sweet future we got to look forward to." His voice, which had started on its usual drawl, ended on a slightly higher pitch.

"Listen!" McKettrick rapped.

They were both silent. A faint, rustling sound as of the pattering of tiny feet came from somewhere within the cabin. Then there was a moment when the sound of gnawing could be heard beneath the floor. More scurrying. Suddenly Lanky cursed almost shrilly, and Buck could hear him kick out and roll over. From just outside came the laughter of a guard.

"Some damned thing ran over my face," the tall puncher gasped. "What—"

"Remember what The Cat said?" Buck jerked. "Cats like to play with rats. He's put some of the half-starved devils in here with us."

LANKY cursed. There was more of the soft pattering of rodent feet somewhere along the floor. Buck felt one on his boot and kicked out viciously. It struck a log wall with a soft "plop" and there was a quick squeal.

"There must be twenty of the starved brutes in here," Lanky gasped.

"Yeah. El Gato probably keeps them to stage fights. I saw a half dozen cats and some dogs in the village. Some of them looked as though they'd been well chewed at one time or another. A pit with a couple of cats, or a dog, and a dozen or so rats in it would be that sidewinder's idea of a good show. Damn!"

Something had nipped one of Buck's fingers. He jerked his hands away and the rodents scurried off. Lanky cursed again.

"Reckon by morning that ——— 'll have a couple of crazy rannahans to throw to his pets if this keeps up," he muttered.

Buck was thinking the same thing. Twelve hours in the dark, with hands and feet bound, and trying to fight off a score of ravenous rats, after what they had been through the previous forty-

eight hours, might be just a little more than sanity could support.

Buck had inched himself close to the wall, wedging his hands and body as tightly against the logs as he could, that the rats might not again get at his fingers. Something pricked the palm of one hand. He shifted a little and felt it with his finger tips.

Hope ran high for a second. If some nail, or jagged piece of metal had been driven into the log and left there, there might yet be a chance of cutting himself loose. That hope died. What he had felt had only been a sliver of wood, a short, sharp wedge where a spike had been pulled out. Any attempt to use it as a lever, or in any way as an abrasive on his cords would break it off. Then a thought suddenly came to him, and he began to examine it carefully.

"Reckon a fellow could bang his head against these logs, or the staple, hard enough to cash in?" Lanky called softly.

"Hard enough for him to pass out and let the rats get in some work, maybe. But say, our cords 're made of rawhide, ain't they?" McKettrick asked quickly, his voice shaking slightly with suppressed emotion.

"Yeah. What th' blazes of it?"

"I don't know, but I got a hunch. Maybe it'll work. Most likely it won't. Now you do what I tell you—fight like blazes every time a rat comes near you. Don't let any of them get close to you if you can hear him."

You think you need to tell me to do that? You're plumb out of your—"

"And I'm going to lie perfectly quiet while you drive 'em over this way," Buck continued without paying any attention to his partner's interruption.

"My Gawd, he's out of his head already. What in bloody, blue blazes 's got into you. What kind of a hare-brained, jackass of an idea you think you got?"

"Shut up, now, and do like I told you."

Lanky started to talk softly to himself. The final words were given in a loud yell. One of the rodents had run across his face again. His body threshed around like a cat tied in a sackful of ants. There was a skitter of tiny feet and Buck felt one of the animals cross his leg.

Delicately, he inched an arm along the log. He felt the little triangle of wood prick the skin half way down from the elbow. He moved a little farther and felt it touch his wrist; a little farther and when he pressed gently again there was no feeling. The wedge had touched one of the rawhide lashings. He moved the arm back a fraction of an inch and again felt the sharp little spike. Then, gritting his teeth, he pressed it into the flesh and scraped it steadily and evenly toward the lashing.

THERE was a sharp pain as the skin was torn and a tiny ripping sound as the sliver broke loose from the wood. If he had not succeeded in this attempt, Buck knew there would be no opportunity for a second try. He felt the warm blood, heard it drip on the floor. He struggled to a sitting position and felt blood on the palms of his hands, felt it running across the lashings, soaking into them. Finally, when he could detect no more flow, could not make it continue by twisting his wrist against the cords, he lay down.

He stretched his arms as far away from his body as he could, and waited. Over on the other side of the room Lanky was muttering and every little while kicking out in the direction of one of the rats. Once he called, but

Buck did not answer. Minutes passed. One of the hungry animals touched his wrist and Buck jerked involuntarily. It squeaked and darted away. Buck cursed at himself and stiffened for the next attempt.

Outside the cabin he heard voices. Then someone dropped a box. There were soft thumps and a great squealing among the rats in the pit. McKettrick realized another load of them had been dumped in. He heard Lanky curse, and knew that his partner had likewise understood the meaning of the sounds. A little later it happened again, and within a quarter of an hour a third time.

Buck again felt one of the animals touch his wrist. He had been conscious of the presence of several of them between him and the wall. He could hear others approaching. They scented fresh blood. This time he did not move.

A sharp pain shot up his arm. He could not help the jerk that followed it. The rat jumped back, but it advanced again. They were growing bolder. He felt it on the rawhide lacing. He clenched his hands slowly, and tightly. There was a tug, the feel of gnawing. Others came to join the feast. Often there were sharp pains that wrung half groans and a twitching of the muscles from him. Once he writhed silently, trying to endure. The rats leaped back, but closed in immediately, more ravenous with the scent of fresh blood in their noses and the taste of it on their lips.

Lanky spoke again, but still Buck did not answer. The tall puncher had been quiet for some time. Finally he realized that the rats had deserted him and his imagination began to work. They had left him—and his partner would not answer. Only occasionally had he heard Buck move. And more and more often he heard squeaks, as though the rodents were fighting over some choice morsel.

"Buck, for Gawd's sake, what are you up to?" he whispered, anxiety sharpening his voice.

McKettrick did not reply.

"'F you don't answer me I'm going to call in the guards to see what th' hell's goin' on."

BUCK spoke then. "If you do, we're both finished. Shut up, you lean fat-head. Wait! By th' peal-heeled I believe I got 'er. She's givin'."

Lanky heard the patter of scattering rats and asked "What!" sharply. He got no answer. He didn't know that Buck was straining with every ounce of his power at the gnawed and weakened, blood-soaked rawhide. There was a sharp snap, and Buck let out his breath in an exultant "A-a-ah!"

A second later he was binding his wrists with strips torn from an undershirt. Then he was rubbing circulation back into his fingers while whispering his success to his partner. The fingers, feeling restored in them, were applied to the lashings about his ankles. Within ten minutes he was kneeling at Lanky's side, working on his partner's bonds and giving low, whispered plans.

As the night wore on, the sound of additional rats being dumped into the big pit outside came to them with less and less frequency. But the sounds of the animals already there constantly increased. There was an almost continuous squealing now. At length they heard members of the gang moving around outside. The crack at the bottom of the door began to show gray. Dawn had arrived. With it came the scent of cooking food.

Finally a great jabbering arose. The village was beginning to gather for the treat of torture in store for them. Close to the door, they heard El Gato com-

manding two of his men to untie the victims and strip their clothes from them, while two others stood guard with carbines. The cords about their wrists would be cut free just as they were shoved into the pit, he stated. In case they fought, they were to be knocked unconscious, or shot in the legs, but under no circumstances were they to be killed.

The door of the cabin was thrown open and two men entered. Behind them came two more with leveled carbines. The first of the two paused uncertainly. His light-blinded eyes could not examine closely the dark interior of the cabin, yet he felt that something was wrong. The peon behind pushed him forward impatiently. This bandit was anxious for the fun to start.

Suddenly they seemed to leap sideways, the first one to one side of the door, the second to the other side. One of them made a choking sound that was immediately cut off. Strong fingers were gripping his throat. One of the hands clamped there came away and jerked the man's six-gun from its holster.

The two guards rushed in, the hammers of their carbines clicking back. From each side of the door came the heavy report of a forty-five, and the two guards pitched forward, their carbines dropping to the floor. One of the first to enter managed to jerk himself away. Buck McKettrick swung a fist from somewhere in the vicinity of his right knee. The Mexican staggered back, dancing a hasty retreat as he tried to keep his balance.

El Gato, hearing the commotion, sensing that something was decidedly wrong, had sprung before the door and was about to enter. The peon collided with him just as the following Buck McKettrick swung his fist a second time. He was no sharpshooter—with his fists. The blow landed full on the leader's chest. El Gato staggered back, his heels catching the edge of the ridge of dirt just outside the cabin.

Then Buck saw one of the gang raise a carbine. He fired the six-gun he had taken from the guard. He was a sharpshooter with that weapon. Lanky, directly behind Buck, jumped ahead of him. His partner had had his share of blows at The Cat. Lanky swung a long arm in a round-house sweep. It caught El Gato under the chin as he was about to sit down. It straightened him. He staggered back another step, his feet working automatically, his eyes gone blank. One heel struck the top of the pile of dirt. He went over backward, slid—dropped.

More guns appeared. Lanky and Buck opened up in earnest. The mob were all in front of them, around the edge of the pit. One of those closest, with two Colts in his belts, tried to dive under the rancher's guns. Buck's six-gun slashed down. The man dropped, and Buck and Lanky had an extra brace of revolvers.

CRIES of alarm, of fright, rose from the milling crowd. Women fought like furies to get loose. Some of them did. They raced for the shelter of the cabins. Some of them got in the way of their own men. They dropped, and stayed down. Those of the gang who could, dropped behind the ridge of dirt on the opposite side of the pit.

"Keep 'em in the open," Buck yelled, and fired at a peon who was racing for the shelter of the cabin across the street. He didn't reach it.

Buck and Lanky backed a little way into the doorway. Directly in front of them the space was cleared. A few of the renegades reached the shelter of a cabin. Most of them found cover of sorts in a grove on the other side

of the fighting pair. A few managed to get in a volley. Lanky spun back against the door casing at the impact of lead in his left deltoid. Buck felt a streak of fire race along his scalp just above the ear. He was working with the carbine now. Lanky dropped. Buck looked down at him.

"After more ammunition," he jerked, crawling toward the two bodies in the blackness of the cabin behind them.

From the pit came a high-pitched scream. Another followed, and another. There was a sound of violent threshing. A gray, furry little body was flung high in the air. A second followed. The long-drawn cries continued, a wailing, frenzied obbligato to the increased squealing of rats.

"Good Gawd! El Gato's down there. Swell place for a 'Cat'," Lanky gasped as he shoved a fist full of cartridges at Buck McKettrick.

"We won't fire on any of you hombres if you want to come and take that snake out of the pit. Come unarmed. You'll have to work fast," Buck yelled at some of the crowd in the grove of trees.

There was movement there. The two in the doorway held their fire. From the wall of the cabin at their left a rifle muzzle belched fire. A hole was bored in Buck's Stetson, too close to the hair for comfort. Lanky caught the flash and fired across the back of Buck's neck. The burning powder scorched and McKettrick swore. But the holder of the rifle fell forward, outside the shelter of the cabin's corner. The screaming from the pit was continuous now, and there was hysteria in it.

Four men advanced, one of them carrying a coiled lariat. Their leader was the squat, broad-shouldered lieutenant with the pock-marked face. He looked at the two in the doorway closely as he led his men forward. They were apparently unarmed.

"Watch that buzzard," Lanky murmured. "He's th' one who kept that firing squad from shooting, kept us for El Gato's chance to get his claws into us."

For the moment the firing had ceased. The two in the doorway had stepped back half a pace into better cover and, swift as their fingers could manipulate the little brass cylinders, they were punching shells into the loading gates of rifles and six-guns.

"Down!" Lanky dropped as he jerked out his warning.

Buck sprang behind the shelter of the wall, dropped and poked head and rifle muzzle out. The advancing men had spread out a trifle. Just as Lanky yelled, their right hands disappeared behind their backs and came into view with weapons jumping to swift explosions. Lanky and Buck each fired twice. That was sufficient.

"You blasted fools," Lanky yelled at the dead men.

The screams had changed to maniacal laughter that was slowly growing weaker.

"One more chance," Buck called. "And send someone this time who ain't blacker inside than he is out."

"I come, Senor," came a sharp call.

ALONE man left the grove and walked forward, his hands in the air. There was a calm, assured air about him that spoke of an inborn courage. Buck recognized him as the one who had slapped away the youth with the knife as they entered the village. He picked up the lariat dropped by one of the first party. He also picked up one of the dead men's six-guns.

"Wait!" Buck rapped sharply as he heard the click of the hammer on Lanky's rifle.

The man continued to advance, holding both rope and gun high in the air. He mounted the farther ridge of dirt. Only the squealing of rats, and a faint falsetto chattering that did not come from the rats, could be heard. The man looked down and swiftly swung away. Then, resolutely, his olive features ashen, he turned back. He dropped the rope at his feet and, gripping the gun in both hands, raised it and fired. The chattering ceased. The squealing continued.

"Eet was too late, Senors," he called.

"You did well. Now get back to your comrades, and we'll open the ball again," Buck rapped.

The man did not move. He had dropped his gun, now held his arms up, palms toward the two at the cabin.

"Our capitan ees gone! Our lieutenant ees die. Many of our men have fall before the fierce shooting of you gringos. Those left want me to say eef you do not shoot at them, they weel not shoot at you. There are not many left. Only a few who have raid your ranch and keel your comrades are among them, an' they say they were force' by El Gato to do eet. Many, like myself, join El Gato because we theenk he was an insurrecto, a what you say, 'patriot,' like ourselves. We find out too late what he and the others really are."

"Yeah! We'll let you loose and then someone will stick a knife or plant a pound of lead in us th' first time our backs are turned," Lanky called.

The Mexican drew himself up a little straighter.

"The Senor mistake me. I am now leader, and I am not another El Gato. I do not lie. My men will come forward and they will leave their weapons behind. We only ask to be permit' to return to our own country. I weel put myself in your hands until you are safe out of theese valley, and I weel promise you El Gato's band weel be no more."

"I believe the jasper means it," Lanky whispered.

That night, many miles nearer the Diamond K, Lanky looked across at his brooding partner while he added another stick of wood to the fire. There was a faint touch of anxiety in his voice.

"She's all over, Buck. Quit worryin' about it. Won't do no good now, an' we got to plan on rebuildin' th' Diamond K."

Buck McKettrick glanced up at the glittering stars. "Wasn't thinkin' about that, Lanky." He continued on a note of peaceful satisfaction. "I was thinkin' that, maybe, somewhere up there, some loyal Diamond K waddies now understand that the job they cashed in for is finished."

Buffaloed

By Will B. Goode

It Took the Meekest Man in the Crowd to Show Up an Oversized Bully

ABOUT the only man entirely exempt from The Brute's reviling was little Henderson, the book-keeper and cashier of the San Joaquin Lumber Company. The reason for this, without a doubt, was because he was so diminutive and retiring as to pass unnoticed. A quiet chap of some forty-odd, he was, who still acted as if he were some unimportant clerk in a city office back in God's Country. He even wore a stiff collar, as well as a waistcoat under his jacket, down in this heat hole of Mexico. The only times he had ever had any dealing with The Brute was when he had given him his pay envelope at the end of the month—and even then his head only was visible through the little glass window. It was an ordinary head, too—a sandy haired, pale-faced head that was so extremely plain as to somehow blend in with the yellow grain of the woodwork about the cage. No, it really isn't any wonder that it didn't attract the attention of the other. Be that as it was, the fact remained that he was never bothered. His existence might have been unknown to the big giant of a man!

When it came to The Brute, you could safely say that he looked his sobriquet. He stood some six-feet-four and he tipped the scales at precisely two hundred-and-thirty-six. More than that, his limbs and features were in such excellent proportion that he was a decidedly pretty figure of a man. It was when you saw his face that you sort of shrank. It was a hard face and a cruel one. His prominently-ridged nose, broken so that the beak of it was more accentuated, reminded one of a clutching talon; his mouth was long and straight and thin-lipped—so thin that there was no color to it and that it looked horribly cold; his jaw was large, aggressive; but his eyes were the small, coal-black eyes of a sneaky reptile. They were the things that made you most hate him on sight—and, to be frank, fear him!

At least, Rankin later agreed that perhaps that was it, above everything else, and Rankin was a man who had gamely weathered many storms down in this Campeche jungle. Also, there were fully a dozen other men there—game men with six-shooters at their belts, too—when The Brute had arrived.

He had strolled into the mess-hall of the huge mahogany camp while supper was going on. Leaning his great bulk against the doorway, he had surveyed the crowd at the table with that ugly, arrogant glint in his eyes. At each hip, on a well-worn and well-filled cartridge belt, had hung a forty-five Colt, and his hands had suggestively dropped to either butt. Then, with a lifting of that indistinct mouth and a show of yellowish, fang-shaped teeth, he had inquired if the manager were present?

Rankin, a decent, clean fellow as men go, had answered in the affirmative, admitting that it was he who held the aforesaid position.

"Then you're man *I* want—and I'm the man *you* want," The Brute had returned. "I need a job!"

The words in themselves aren't much; they could easily have been said with a certain joviality so as to make them likable. In this case, however, they smacked more of command than of question. And that was not all. If his face were nastily vicious, it as was nothing to his voice. Several have confessed, since then, that it sent a creepy chill along their spines!

But the manager rubbed his chin, nothing more. Frankly, he *was* in need of a man—badly in need. One of his white helpers, a week ago, had gone out with a bush fever; another, two days later, had drawn his pay and departed for a bit of a spree—and was still spreeing. Possibly that was *partly* why he overlooked the palpably insulting tones:

"Why—why, yes," he said. "I could use a man. To tell the truth, I need one badly. The pay is two hundred Mex. a month—and your board and lodging. Taken?"

"Well," replied The Brute, lounging forward with the loose movement of a gorilla and calmly helping himself to a chair and sitting down, "I kind of guess you are. Just thought I'd stray down to this section—heard it was hell on wheels. Kind of tame back home—all the boys that were quick on the draw left for other parts. This—" and he brazenly scanned the long table—"this sort of looks like it may be my meat. Nifty looking little bunch of rough babies, it strikes *me*. Ha, ha!"

Of course, that was the time when something should have happened; that was the time when the open challenge should have been accepted. Briefly, it was not. On looking back at it, the thing seems queer—mighty queer. Many a man there had stood up against far worse situations—several of them there were known as hot-tempered gun-fighters—but yet not an iron was drawn. Maybe it is difficult to understand, but nevertheless it is true, and that is that just once in a while, once in a decade, say, a stranger can drop into a fairly rough gathering, without even pulling a gun, completely dominate and even cow the community. Anyway, that is what The Brute did.

SUCH is the authentic story of how he came to San Joaquin. What follows is quite as true—but it is of his going.

He turned out to be a good worker. That is, if you wanted to take the viewpoint of the big fellows—the swivel-chair stockholders who sat back comfortably in New York. He had about thirty or so natives to boss, in the business of sawing down giant mahoganies. One thing was immediately apparent. No single gang had ever, in the history of the company, laid low so much wood in a mere working day. Also, there was another thing. No crowd had ever been so wickedly mistreated. The Brute had literally stood over them, an open machete in his hand, and lashed out at a bare and sweating back whenever he thought a *peon* was shirking. And the amount of shirking he thought was done, to the amount that actually was, truly was appalling.

Nevertheless, when he reported to Rankin at the end of the day, and told him of the number of feet felled, the other complimented him after showing his surprise:

"But, by the way," he added, "not *too* hard on the poor devils, you know!"

"I don't handle Sunday-school classes," was the retort, and again it was allowed to pass.

From then on, to truthfully relate, The Brute held sway, and it was a sway that gradually and continually increased. If ever thirteen men—fourteen, if you want to include Henderson, who really didn't count, you might say—were cold and completely bluffed, they were these same white workers of the San Joaquin Lumber Company.

The main delight of The Brute seemed to be the baiting of his companions at the supper table. He jeered at their way of handling their men; he intimated that the gruelling heat, when the thermometer tangoed between a-hundred-and-twenty-five and a-hundred-and-thirty, was too much for the effete specimens he was forced to sit with; he was even known to get away with just one or two personal remarks that—oh, well, that usually *aren't* gotten away with, no matter *how* big they come.

The real funny part of it, when you come down to it, is that he never even had to draw a weapon or use a fist. They'll still tell you, reminiscing over the thing, that they can't understand it. No; they won't admit that they were exactly *afraid* of the man or his gun-play, but they'll sheepishly grant that someway, somehow, God only can tell, they were buffaloed—just plain, common, every-day buffaloed.

But all things come to a climax; all things come to an end. In this case, it

seemed ironic that gentle little Henderson, the one man never bothered, should have had a hand in it. Again, perhaps, it was simply one of the grimly beautiful twists that old Friend Fate likes to kink up the line of life with. Is it significant that it came on a Sunday?

Being the period of rest, it was always looked forward to with enjoyment—for a man could get away into the jungle with a rifle and come back with plenty of game after a bully day's sport. Lately, sad to confess, it is quite possible that it had been longed for in order to rid oneself of The Brute. Anyway, although that part of it didn't bother Henderson, he usually took advantage of it by riding through the wild bush-trails and greedily absorbing what he termed "the wonders of nature."

As he was returning, on this particular afternoon, he heard a voice ahead that caused him to draw up his horse and peer through the thick foliage. The voice was that of The Brute, raised higher and filthier than ever. It was, as usual, casting extremely vile and disgusting reflections upon countless generations of a poor *peon*. The man, it seemed, had not been quite quick enough in getting out of the way.

Henderson managed to twist his neck and catch a glimpse of the two around a bend in the trail. The Brute was sitting his horse, his teeth bared and his eyes glinting viciously; the native was cringing before him, too terror-stricken to even get out of the way.

The book-keeper heard The Brute use an extraordinary rank word as he raised his whip to strike—and then, suddenly, he saw the *peon* click his teeth and hunch forward, a look of desperate courage on his goaded face as he got ready to at least fight for his life.

And then, as the cashier was about to cry out and beg the big man to spare the native, he instead caught his breath in astonishment. The Brute's eyes widened and his mouth sagged as he gazed at the Mexican; and, as he mumbled some unintelligible words and rode hurriedly on, Henderson was sure that his face was very, very white.

That night at supper The Brute was especially ugly. He used more insulting names than ever; he told more incongruous stories of his killings and battles; also his voice was louder, fiercer, and his snaky eyes had the devil in them if ever a human eye posed that expression. Just the mere sight of him would have made a brave man hesitate and think. Therefore, it is not strange that the absence of little Henderson was unnoticed.

When the meal was about half over he made his appearance, as quiet and unobtrusive as always. Had the men not been so engrossed by The Brute, they would have seen that he came in the opposite direction from his room. It was necessary for him to pass the bully's chair, and, as he did so, he stumbled against it and somehow knocked a plate from the occupant's hand.

The Brute, with a snarl of intense rage issuing from his lips, sprang to his feet as he kicked away his chair. He fastened his eyes on the little man who came only to his breast, and then he stuck his fists akimbo. Following this, he opened his ugly mouth and poured forth this fire:

"You dirty, sneakin', white-faced little piece of dirt. You chicken-livered, stinkin', sandy-haired mutt! You— By God, runt, do you know that I've *killed* men for less than that? Skinned 'em alive as if they were lousy snakes—skinned 'em alive, I tell you. And you—*you*, you insignificant swine—*you* dare to hit my chair and knock a plate out of my hand?"

HE paused, bent closer, and his breath fanned the cheek of his intended victim:

"Seein' you're such a *little* runt," he continued with a bellow, "I'll let you off. But you've got to get down on the floor like the pig you are, and lap up every drop of food you spilled! . . . Get me? Down on your knees, you spindle!"

And then, for the first time in over two months, the men saw action. Henderson did not flinch. Instead, he slipped his hand coolly into his pocket and brought out something that shone brightly—a something that proved to be a small, rusty, twenty-two calibre revolver which it later turned out he had picked up in a pawn-shop back home for a-dollar-and-a-half because he had heard men should carry arms when travelling. His voice,

when he spoke, was strangely cool and strangely penetrating:

"Kill *me*, eh? Kill *me*, you big, hulking bully! . . . Ask *me* to lap up your food, eh? . . . You cheap four-flusher—you fake gun-fighter—I've stood just about enough of this, understand? It was all right as long as you left *me* alone—but now you've brought it on yourself and you've got only yourself to blame! . . . Threaten me—threaten *me*, eh? . . . Draw, you ugly mucker!"

At that he began firing, pumping his gun in the direction of the other's feet:

"Draw," he kept snapping—"draw, you piker. Take out your gun and fight—take out your gun before I lose my head completely. I don't like to kill a man without giving him a chance, and I'm giving you the last one! . . . Draw, you skunk!"

The Brute might suddenly have become petrified. At first, he had looked at the little man with the same look he had given the *peon* in the bush when the latter had at last turned. Then, very swiftly, his mouth and eyes went wider, and his face turned a sickly white—a white that instantly changed to a greenish hue. His shoulders drooped as a spasm shot through his body—a spasm that ended with a look of utterly heart-and-body-gripping fear. So he stood there, breathless, paralyzed.

Little Henderson's face, now, took on a rather vicious look. He fired once more at the big man's feet:

"Quick," he said. "You've got three—exactly three. If you don't draw then I shoot to kill! . . . One— . . . two— . . . th——

But that was enough. The Brute managed to regain the power of his limbs; also of his voice. With one last look at little Henderson, he used them both. He threw up his hands and tore madly from the room, and he was crying at the top of his lungs:

"Don't shoot—Oh, God, don't shoot! Have pity—have a heart, please! I—I was only fooling—I was only fooling! I *swear* it, Mr. Henderson, I——".

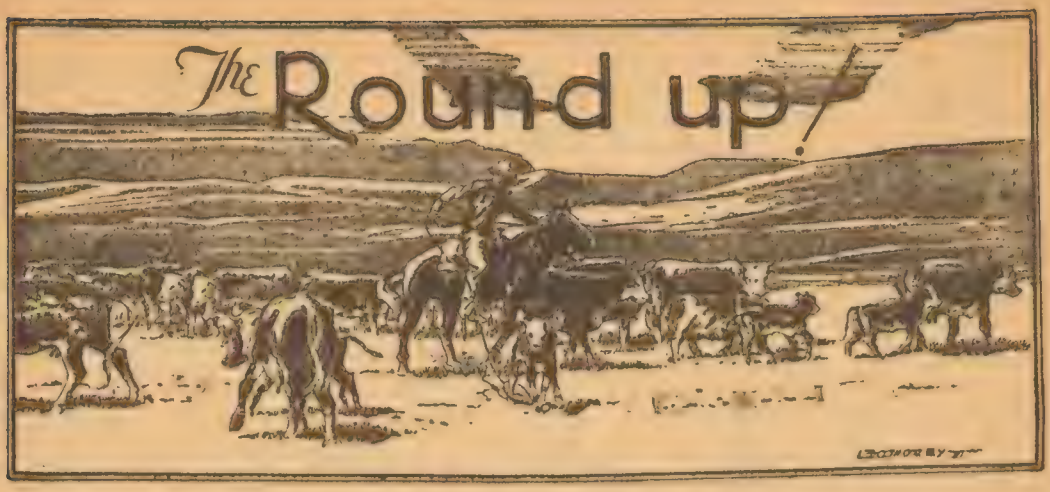
And so it was that The Brute left San Joaquin!

When his companions had finished praising and thanking the cashier, one of them became cool enough to examine the floor:

"Say, Henderson," he asked, "Where in the deuce did you shoot, eh? I am damned if *I* can find your bullet holes!"

The small, unobtrusive chap laughed a trifle nervously:

"To tell the truth," he admitted, "I absolutely *detest* fire-arms and everything connected with them. So many accidents happen, you know. Frankly, that was why I was late for supper. I took the lead out of the cartridges so that I couldn't possibly do any harm to the poor chap, or to anyone else. Oh, no; no real bullets for *me*. That's not *my* job, thank God!"



A DEPARTMENT FOR DISCUSSION

"Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine" feels that it is for the best interests of all to provide a place in which readers and writers can get together.

You are invited to write as freely as you like to The Round-Up. Criticisms and commendations are particularly desired. If you write about things you wish kept confidential, be sure to make that clear. Otherwise we shall feel at liberty to print in this department anything you write.

Readers desiring Pen Pals must give a name and address to which Pals may send letters direct. We will not undertake to act as medium in such correspondence further than to publish letters requesting Pen Pals and these only as soon after receipt as is convenient. We suggest you write to those asking for letters and save time and perhaps disappointments.

Tell us what you think of the magazine and its stories. Here is "open range" for readers, authors, editors. Address all communications, The Round-Up, c/o "Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine," 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City.

By "COTEAU" GENE, FOREMAN

HOH KOLA: This yere is March 15, 1935 A. D. (Hopeful says A. D. means "Atter Depression".) I says, "Wotcha means *"atter"?* He says, *"Atter it started,* dang it! Yo' don't start slappin' on brands ontil atter yo've registered yore brand, do yuh?" Butcha can't argie good with Hopeful. Iff'n I'd esplain t' him as A. D. means Atter th' Deluge he'd think I meant atter th' repeal o' th' 18th. Amen'ment, thet bein' th' only kint o' a deluge we've had in th' West since anybody can remember.

I got up airly this mornin' t' hear th' dickie birts sing 'cause I seed by th' Cow-Country Cronicle as Bill Jinks seen a robin on Jim Johnsons hay stack last Monday. I leaned ag'in th' windmill an' listened with both ears cocked, but th' nighest thing t' a birt I hern war Hopeful's jackass a brayin fer his breakfust. So I thought I'd put in th' time burnin' a spavin off'm a plow hoss I swauped fer last week an' git him ready t' sell t' some wheat farmer fer spring work.

I ain't no more'n got th' assid painted on when I hern Hopeful yellin' his head off. I thinks th' shack's on fire, an' fergittin' I had th' assid bottle in m' hand with th' cork out, I bulges out th' barn door an' slopped enough assid on m' hand t' burn a bunion off'n a cast iron elephant. Hopeful's still yellin' bloody murder, but so'm I an' huntin' fer th' axle grease box, axle grease bein' th' best dope on earth fer headin' off a assid burn iff'n yo' ain't got nawthin' better.

When I gits t' th' shack, yere's Hopeful readin' a brand new "Wild West Story and Complete Novel Magazine" an' leavin' th' bacon burn an' th' coffee pot bilin' over. I grabs off th' skillit with m' burnt hand an' made

a grab fer th' coffee pot with th' tother jes' she heaved an' belched bilin' java all over thet hand. Holly Mackerel! Th' NEXT TIME I gits up afore breakfust I'll make somebody prove it!

I draped th' coffee pot on Hopeful's bar' feet an' th' bacon down his back. An' then HE had suthin' t' holler 'bout as war *wuth* hollerin' 'bout. It tickled me so t' see th' way he bucked. I jes' stood with both hands in th' water pail an' laughed. Th' coot as clamed "Missouri likes company" shore knowed his tear-taters. Wot happened when me 'n Hopeful quit howlin' was plumb romantic an' spring-like. So' much so I jes' had t' put it inta poetry:

I looked at Hopefeul
He looked at me.
When a robin started singin'
In a cottonwood tree.

We plumb fergot all our troubles an' went out t'gether t' welcome Ol' Cockey home. Finally Hopeful fished th' bacon out'n his shirt-tail and we went back an' et. While I'm eatin' I happens t' remember how th' whole mess got started an' I says, "Wot'n-hell war yo' a razooin' 'bout in th' fust placet?"

Hopeful's got his mouth full o' flap-jacks, so he can't talk, but he pints his knife at th' new magazine an' says "Glub-bull-glub." I could see by th' way his eyes bulged he war either excited er chokin' t' death. So I picks up th' magazine as th' mail carrier had fetched while I war in th' hoss barn an' started, like everybody elst does, t' leaf her over t' TH' ROUND-UP. But, at thet, Hopeful shakes his head, gulps like a osterich swallerin' a nail keg, an' grabs th' book outn my hands an' turns her back t' th' Bill-o-Fair page. He drips 'lasses on a place off his knife an' says:

"LOOKEY! Th' Editor is boomin' yo' fer Presidunt an' will be a lookin' fer a new Foreman an' I'm gonna apply fer yore job."

I thins out th' lasses with my trigger finger so I can read wot th' Editor done writ an' I'm a Sioux batchelor iff'n Hopeful ain't more'n half right! 'Cause this yere is wot he said:

"The Round-Up . . . Conducted by
"Coteau Gene" Stebbings

If our Foreman keeps endearing himself with his chatter and songs and what-not, we'll be singing "Stebbings For President" one of the days! Do I hear someone yell, "Of What?"

"The danged DUDE!" I says. "He couldn't leave a *good* idea stand on its own laigs". He WOULD put a bur onder its tail! "OF WHAT?" he says. "OF WHAT?"

"My Gawd! WOT *IS* THAR LEFT T' BE PRESIDUNT *OF* ESCEPT THESE YERE UNITED STATES? Everything elst is gone BUST, an' I'll has t' hurry or *it'll go bust too* afore I can git elected an' save th' Nation!"

"Yo' won't has t' do THET!" Hopeful cuts in. "Huey Long, Father Coughlin and General Johnson is gonna do *thet*. All you'll has t' do is listen t' THEM, an' do wot *they* says."

I turns up m' snout at Hopeful. I says, "Hell, I ain't no double-jinted rubber-man. 'Sides which, iff'n I'm gonna be Presidunt I'm gonna BE Presidunt. Anyhow Huey's aimin' t' run ag'in' me."

"Yo' don't has t' worry none 'bout Huey," says Hopeful. "He's done said HIS piece alretty. All yo' got t' do is copper his bets an' double 'em t' win hands down."

"How yo' means?" I asts. "I don't quite cotton yore system. Iff'n it's s' danged good, swaller th' remains o' thet flap-jack an' spit out yore mind."

Hopeful doubles up th' last flap-jack

two ways an' rams it home with his knife. He wipes th' 'lasses off'n his chin with th' back o' his hand, licks th' back o' his hand clean, an' is all set fer a polytical argiement.

"It's this-a-way," he heads off. "Huey has promised everybody as wants t' work a job at Union Wages. Them as don't wanta work can try an' content theyse'fs wif $200 a month. He'll built a $5000 house for everybody as wants one, an' furnish a Billion Dollars t' edicate hay-hands fer white collar jobs."

"Yeah," I cuts in, "an' yo' espects *me* t' buck a lay-out all thimble-rigged like thet, an' win?"

"Shore!" he says, "I mought do it m'se'f, only I'd ruther be Foreman o' Th' Round-up, 'tain't so wearin' on yore brains. Now all yo' gotta do is like I says: copper Huey's bets an' double on him."

I shakes m' head. "I don't gitcha," I says, "It don't seem none possible."

Hopeful sneers, "An' yo' opines yo're some hoss-trader! Shucks! Yo're a measley leetle sucklin' colt in pollyticks! Now listen closset an' I'll be yore Brain Truster. I could give thet feller Richberg cards an' spades an' beat him both ways from th' seven-spot. Yo' betcha! Yere's m' lay-out fer yuh:

"Fust thing t' do is t' fix it with Father Coughlin. He's th' best talker in th' whole drove. Yo' can promise him yo'll sign a bill t' make everybody jine th' Catholic Church, an' iff'n he insists on it yo' can apint him Pope o' America. Git t' General Johnson while he's still groggy from them punches off'n Father Coughlin an' Huey an' tell him yo're gonna bill him fer Grand Exalted Eagle Herder o' th' Universe. He'll like thet, 'cause they been bunkhousin' him 'bout his title o' General. O' course yo'n me knows it's legitimut, him havin' been General Manager o' a farm implement factory.

"Next yo' gits atter Richberg. I'll agree t' resign as yore High Muckey Muck Brain Truster, as soon as I gits on as Foreman o' th' Round-up, an' yo' promises t' give HIM my present job. Git th' big idear? SEE 'M ALL! Promise every one o' 'm jes' wot they wants wust."

"Thet's O.K., fur as it goes." I agrees, but wot'll I do with them constit-u-wants, an' wot'll I do with Huey Long?"

"Yo' don't has t' do NAWTHIN' with Huey! He's made th' mistake o' puttin' in th' fust bid. Fer instance: in placet yo' offerin' t' give any damn fools as wants t' work a JOB, offer 'm TWO JOBS, like Jim Farley's got. An' in placet o' offerin' th' wise hombres as don't wanta work a measley $200 a month, offer 'm $400 an' travelin' espense."

At thet, Hopeful tilts his cheer back ag'in' th' wall an' hooks his thumbs in his suspenders an' starts twiddlin' his fingers. "They shore fixes everythin', don't it?" He asts. Iff'n thet don't putcha in right with th' peepel wot in hell would?"

I has t' admit it sounds purty good. Jes' one thing is a botherin' me yit. I figgers I jes' well git it out'n m' system. I says, kinda mumblin' like, "Who's gonna pay th' taxes?"

"Gee WHILLIKINS!" Yelps Hopeful, leavin' his cheer come down with sech a bang on th' floor it jarred th' stove-pipe out 'n th' hole in th' roof. "Wot th' hell does YO' care 'bout WHO PAYS TH' TAXES? Huey ain't worryin' any is he? Father Coughlin ain't worryin', is he? I don't know as Presidunt Roosevelt is a worryin' MUCH. Leave Andy Mellon pay most o' 'em, an iff'n thar's any more millionairs still left make 'em shell out too. Instid o' leavin' 'em hang onta three er four millions, like Huey says, they probably

bein' HIS LIMIT, anyhow. Don't leave 'em more'n thutty cents. Er, dang 'em, they'll have all th' money back ag'in a hour atter th' game opens ag'in."

I has t' admit some more thet's a fine idear. Not ONE o' 'em pinches me whar it hurts. So I says, "O.K. Right now I'm a candydate fer Presidunt!" Hopeful jumps up an' yells: "HOO-RAW! Three cheers an' a bobcat fer Presitunt Coteau Gene Stebbings!"

"Whoah!" I howls, "Back up! Wot about th' Labor Unions? Wot about th' Sogers' Bounty? Thar's half a dozen Labor Unions, an' they fights each other wuss'n they do th' Capitailists."

Hopeful turns kinda pail an' sot down ag'in. "Gosh", he grumbles, "They *is* a tough proposition!" He worms arount oneasy as a sheep tick on a goat's back. Purty soon he picks up his coffee cup an' starts lickin' th' sugar settlin' outn th' bottom. Every now'n then he shoots a eye at me over th' lip o' th' cup. I seen plain m' Top-hand Brain Truster is bogged down jes' 'bout as bad as if I'd sent him t' London on one o' them Dipsomania Expoditions. So, jes like Presidunt Roosevelt has 't, I tries t' do some Bustin' an' Trustin' m'se'f. I thinks it's a danged shame iff'n this UNION should come so nigh havin' a Great Presidunt, oncet, an' have him fall down jes' on account thar bein' too damn many Unions as wan't united.

Final, I says, "I don't know as we needs worry 'bout th' Sogers' Bounty. Seems like Roosevelt will has t' take care o' IT while he's still messin' arount on th' job. But wot t' do with all them locoed Labor Unions is problem. I reckon I'll has t' hire Hitler 'n Moosalene t' help me on. Me bein' a Brother Moose, Ol' Moosalene oughta help me fer nawthin'."

Hopeful brightens up a mite at havin' th' Sogers' Bounty off'n his hands. He says, "Iff'n I jes' had one, good, leetle snort o' forty-rod, say 'bout three fingers—in a wash-tub—it mought loosen up m' brains so I could hatch out a inspurashun. Yo' ain't got nuthin' onder yore bunk, has yo', Coteau?"

"Yo' knows danged well I DID HAVE, also yo' knows danged well iff'n I hadn't moved it I wouldn't have nawthin' NO PLACET! But yo' hitch yorese'f outside an' look fer thet cock-robin a minit an' I'll see wot I can dig up t' save th' Nashun."

While Hopeful is out, I opens th' clean-out door onder th' oven in th' cook-stove an' fishes out th' remains o' a bottle I'd hid in thar with a wire I'll looped onta its neck. When I whistled t' Hopeful, I'd alretty inspired m'se'f, some, so in case thar wan't enough left t' jazz-up m' Brain Truster I could mebbe go inta a confrance with m'se'f. Hopeful made it in Two SPRINGS, one outside with th' dickie birts, an' one he made t' git inside t' my forty-rod remains.

I can't keep m' eyes off'n him. "Cripes!" I thought, "iff'n a hoss would take a drench outn a bottle like Hopeful does wot a swell job it'd be t' be a hoss-doctor! Nobody had t' holt *his* nairs shet an' rub th' dose down with a grip on his feed-pipe. Thar war jes' one splash an' a sizzle. Then I ain't got no more forty-rod left than Mrs. Ida B. Wise Smith o' th' W.C.T.U. an' I ain't feelin' half as WISE, yet."

"Sit down!" I yelps, "afore yo' falls down! A shot like THET would onjint a bull-jine!"

Hopeful topples over onta my bunk an' kicks up his heels. "Whoopee!" He chirps, "Hoo-raw fer Presidunt Coteau Gene! Hoo-raw t' CHUNK!"

"Shet up!" I odters, "Thet ain't no way fer a Brain Truster t' ack. Wot about them Labor Unions?"

Hopeful's eyes glitter like two burnt holes in a blanket, at me. "Yo danged ol' jug-head!" he said. "Yo consarned ol' Logger-head! Who in hell would WANT T' BELONG t' a LABOR UNION an' WORK when they could git a pension o' $400 a month? Hell, yo're as good as e-lected RIGHT NOW!"

I thinks as Hopeful is plumb RIGHT. I'm alretty feelin' some sorry fer Frank Roosevelt, him, now, jes' sorta stickin' arount t' save funeral espenses, yo' might say, with me bein' Presidunt *pro-tem a la factorium* as them Brain Truster Profs. would say when they fust come outn their holes up t' Hartford an' Yell an' afore they larns United States off'm th' Continental Congress from Texas an' North Dakotay.

Thems th' planks in my platfoam so fur as I've got 'em laid, but I've left plenty room on th' stringers fer more planks an' I ain't nailed any planks down solid, so I can take any o' 'em up easy an' lay in any yo'-all mought like better. I figgers as a Presidunt is a danged sucker as spikes his planks down s' danged hard he can't move 'em outta sight atter he's elected.

But th' best news is as thet shot in th' gizzard I took afore I inwited Hopeful t' drink from th' fountain o' youth wan't lost in ME. I done figgered out wot t' do with Frank Roosevelt. I'm gonna apint him Chief Forrester o' The Shelter-belt. Then he'll be s' danged busy shovelin' sand off'n them trees he's havin' planted he won't have no time t' come bullin' out 'n th' sticks like Herb Hoover did last fall. I'm gonna suggest as he takes a vacation out in th' Shelter-belt right away so he can start dewolipin' some more stomicks th' pack his water in. Mebbe I can git Doc Hickock t' loan Frank one o' his irrigatin' pumps iff'n th' dust will quit blowin' long enough so Doc can find th' pump.

I'll order Congress t' make a appropriation fer Chrustmus decorations over ever tree as Frank gits t' grow four feet high. Me'n Frank will make taller candles outn all them cows as starved t' death out thar last year t' light th' TREE up with an' we can lay out a handful o' corn in th' sun an' string it on th' TREE when it pops.

We'll inwite all th' kids t' hang socks on it Christmas Eave, 1936 an' me an' Santa Claus Frank will fill 'em up with green candy rattle-snakes, licorish scorpens an' chawin'-gun trantualas, they shore oughter tickle th' kids! An' right in th' top o' every sock I'll put in a big pitcher o' ME with my coat o' arms in th' upper off-hand corner: A bootjack rampant crossed with a rollin'-pin argent. An' iff'n everybody ain't Happy I can't think o' who it'd be onless mebbe Herb Hoover an' Andy Mellon, but, hell, they ain't happy no-how, both sufferin' from sprained necks they got lookin' arount th' corner fer Prosperity.

I'm gonna FOOL YO'! Naw, I ain't gonna ast none o' yo' t' vote fer me. Not 'cause I don't want yo' too, but 'cause I don't aim t' insult yo in th' same ol' way yo're s' use t'. When a Pollytishun has ast yo' t' vote fer him yo' suspects he's gonna offer yo' a JOB iff'n he's elected. Hell, yo' won't NEED NO JOB, iff'n I'M ELECTED!

I'm commissionin' yo' ALL t' be my Brain Trusters onder th' commant o' General Hopeful Hankins, C.B.T.A. (Chief Brain Trust Authority). Yo' start roundin'-up con-stit-u-wants an' fint out wot they WANT an' promise it to 'em, F.O.B.B.W., i.is. Free On Board th' Band Wagon. Them as don't know who t' sign on with can write

any o' th' follerin' CON-STIT-U-WANTS as has alretty signed up. Iff'n any body baulks, leave me know an' I'll wipe 'em off th' Pen Pal tally-book. I'll betcha THET'LL make 'em give down their milk!

Bob Miller, 424 Woodland Ave., Guerneville, Calif. Bill says he has visited all th' places mentioned in the novel "The Scorpion Sting". He wants more yarns about California. O.K., Bill, I never been thar, so I'll write one right away. It oughter be good! Bill's 20, 5 ft. 10 in.; weighs 162 lbs. Has brown hair, blue eyes and mixes in all kints of sports. He'll swap snaps.

Miss C. T. Webb, P. O. Motata, Bay of Plenty, New Zealand, is "lookin' for boy-pards between ages 23 an' 32, will exchange snaps. She is 18; 5 ft. 4 in., sun-tanned, a 'tom-boy,' browny-hazel eyes, golden, wavy hair; plays piano, uke, banjo guitar 'and can dance ontil th' cows come home.'" Her only worry is: "If you ever stop publishing this *yere* magazine I'm afraid I'll lose my appetite." An' me 'n Hopeful is afeared we *better* lose ours iff'n we do.

NOW SIT UP YO' OL' PELICANS AN' LISTEN T' THIS!

Le Roy, Kansas.

Dear Sir: It is permissable for me to crash in on your circle? I am free, white, and have seen sixty summers, nevertheless I am neither in my dotage nor am I an *antediluvian.* (Whoah! Wot'n hells them things? I've seen *sixty winters,* an' I ain't one o' 'em nuther, as I know of. But I am a candidate. Yo' vote fer me, Ma'am an' I agree t' shoot any o' them—them wotchamacallums as pesticates yo'.)

I can hold my own with any of the younger set when it comes to working (An' I'll bet they leave yo' holt it) or walking. I have three (I ain't shore o' th' next wort. Oh yeah, I gitcha! HOBBYS (Excuse me, ma'am I done thought, at fust, yo' said HUBBYS) reading, which has become an obsession, hiking and fishing. (I feels with yo, on th' FISHIN', lady). I have brown hair with a sprinkle of gray; am 5 ft. 11 in. and weigh around 125 lbs.

I enjoy a joke as well as anyone. (So do I iff'n it ain't on me.) My objective is a position as housekeeper or companion to some person or persons which will enable me to keep the wolf and the County-house remotely distant. (Remember I'm offerin' $400 an' UP a month fer votes, payable when I'm elected.)

Our state is known as "Sunny Kansas," or "The Sun-flower State" because of the many sun-flowers along the highways. (Yep, Oncet I writ a pom 'bout yore State, but th' durned sun-flowers went t' seed on me afore I could sell it. Mebbe I'll dedicate it t' yo' an' Doc Hickock an' run it in with yo' Pen Palers war nobody'll notice it much.)

Those who first see the light o' day here are called Jayhawkers. I haven't seen much of any other state, having been out of Kansas only a few times, across the line into Missouri, so I can draw no comparisons. I have a consuming desire to see the mountains and some of the large cities of the U. S. A. I would certainly like to see your city which I have heard so much about. (I reckon she must mean New York City whar at the EDITOR hangs out. I'll give her a quit-claim deed t' my interest in it fer a peck o' sun-flower seed.)

I would be very remiss if I failed to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine. There is spice and thrill in the stories that grip one, also they are always clean. I lost out on some issues, if anyone has copies to exchange for other magazines please send me a list and I'll make an offer. I would like to correspond with persons of about my own age.

M. TOMLINSON."

Ma'am, me 'n th' outfit is plumb glad t' meet-up with yo'. Now yere's thet sun-flower pome all dedicated to yo' an' Doc Hickock:

SUNFLOWERS

by me

Dedicated to (Miss) M. Tomlinson an' Doc Hickock, both out'n Kansas.

Sunflowers bloomin' on th' trail,
Th' trail o' "Westward Ho!"
Cheerin' on th' weary ones,
As they Westward go.
Noddin' in th' sunshine,
Smilin' golden smiles,
"Howdy! Howdy! Welcome All!
Home's jes' a few more miles."

Sunflowers bloomin' on th' trail,
Th' trail to settin' sun,
Kansas in th' summer-time,
Welcomes everyone.
Rattlin' reach an' creakin' skein,
"Gee! Haw! Buck an' Bill,"
Left behind th' partin' pain,
"Whoop-up fer th' hill!"

Sunflowers bloomin' on th' trail,
Th' trail to Home Sweet Home,
Somewhere on th' Kansas plains,
For all who care to roam.
Long processions rollin' on,
Covered wagons, "paw 'n maw",
To the tune of "Gee-up Buck!
Went "Westward Ho! Hoo-rah! Hoo-rah!"

'Tain't much o' a pom, measured by a litchuary yard-stick, but I betcha Miss Tom an' Doc will onderstand it even iff'n Prof. Browhister don't.

Say, iff'n Franklin D. would have his Shelterbearers plant giant sunflowers as a wind-break for them nussin' young trees he aims t' plant they would help a HEAP t' give them trees a chancet fer their white alleys. Them sun-flower seeds makes danged good feed fer lots o' kints o' stock and both th' seeded heads an' stocks makes plumb good fire fuel. Plant four er five rows on th' winward side, and they'll be as good a shelter-belt by theyself in sixty days as them trees will be in six years, iff'n th' trees do grow. Sunflowers is a dry-climate vegitable an'll grow in weak soil an' from Th' North t' th' South Pole. Say, when I'm selected Presidunt I'll plant sunflowers all over th' "marginal" lands from hell t' breakfust an' I can tell you' even cow-critters won't starve iff'n they can get at sun-flowers fer fodder, they beat hot wind an' dust all t' pieces. But wot we're atter mostly now is Pen Pals, dang it!

Chuck Morrow, c/o U. S. S. Utah, Box 3, *Long Beach, Calif.* Wants "One Million Pen Pals". He's 19; 152; 5 ft. 5½ in. an' is a "lonely Gob". Has visited lots of countries and will swap snaps. Who wants this yere Barnacl Bill? Wot am I offered fer his hide an' taller?

Margaret E. Whitney, Middleville, Fairfield Road, New York, U. S. A. Marg is, I onderstand, th 'best lookin' farm gal in New York State an' she's plumb partial t' cowboys an' cowgals. She's 20; has brown eyes an' hair, an' very tall, in fact, a FIVE FOOTER! She's especially a wonderin whar at is Bob Olson as use t' be signed on with th' Breckton Stock Ranch in Wyoming. Anybody seen Bob lately? Iff'n yo' knows whar he is, go give him a kick in th' slats 'n wake him up!

Pauline Lowery, 2104 *E. 5th St., Chattanooga, Tenn., U. S. A.* Lives right in th' shade o' Lookout Mountain whar my pappy shot a mule off th' mountain. Yo' see he war a scrabblin' UP t' try an' git at some Johnnies on top. He war in charge o' a mule loaded with a light "mountain howitzer". The Johnnies don't want him t' visit 'em an' is a makin' it hot fer him an' his pards. Pappy loads th' howitzer on th' mule, pints th' mule up mountain, tetches off th' pup cannon, an' up went th' ball an' down went th' mule. Pappy claimed as th' mule went down mountain s' fast thet the ball looked like it war a standin' still in th' air over th' spot it started from, an' th' mule done a heap more damage. Me, I war down

t' look over th' placet a short time back an' fount th' PROOF o' pappy's story. *Th' mountain's right than what he said it war.* Yo' write Pauline an' I'll bet she will tell yo' that's So. Pauline is 20, has dark brown hair and eyes an' is another strappin 5 footer. She's interested in sports, yo' fellers is all sports, ain'cha? And in music and liturature, but her favorite tipple is Wild West Stories and Complete Novel.

Say, up on th' mountain they sells swell leetle souvnirs, right on my soapbox I got a wooden paper knife, an' they's a leetle pitcher in it. Yo' squints yore off eye inta a leetle hole an' mebbe yo' can see TH' BATTLE OF LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN, but danged iff'n I can't see pappy's mule! Hopeful says iff'n I'd put a piece o' lookin-glass in th' knife handle I could shore see my pappy's jackass. But dang it, I can't fint a piece o' lookin'-glass small enough t' git in thet hole! Yo' don't reckon Hopeful is tryin' t' cast a REFLECTION er somethin' do you'? Write Pauline an' ast her wot she knows 'bout workin' one o' these jiggers an' leave me know wot she says.

Listen at THIS:

U. S. A. Whipple (217)
Asiatic Station,
Seattle, Wash.

Dear Gene: Have you ever had the port side of your jaw knocked over to the starboard side? Well, if you don't print my plea for Pen Pals I'll do THAT very thing if I have to swim across the ocean to do it. But if you are a prizefighter this offer is withdrawn.

I'm 5 ft. 6 in., have blue hair and brown eyes and a darkey complexion, and can spell DURN near as good as you can. (Huh, wot does a danged sea-soger wanta spell DURN fer?) Sports of all kinds are my hobby, and I read everything I can get my hands on. (I reckon he means that fer his excuse fer readin' this magazine. Th' big brass-polisher!)

"I'm called "The Sea Beast" by the gobs who know me, for wherever I go there is bound to be lots of trouble. I have been quite a number of places, and every night that I rate liberty I am ashore, till two nights ago I was tricked into a bit the outcome is I either stay aboard for a whole year or lose a nice sum of money.

So I can answer all letters sent to me, and still have stamps to answer. I want letters from all over the world and from every state in the Union. And if I fail to answer any of them let them tell you and I will give you three cracks at MY chin. Well, here's hoping I get at least ONE letter.

I remain,
THE SEA BEAST,
HARVEY D. BRUCE.

Shucks! I hopes they keep th' coot a-board all his life. Him a threatenin' t' crack a pore ol' man like me on th' PORT side! Hell, I ain't got no PORT side! I got a Forty-rod side, but its INSIDE. I got several other "sides", includin' th' one I'm sittin' on, but t' hell with a "Port" side er a "Starboard" side. I ain't got NO USE fer 'em a-tall! No wonder they calls Harv "The Sea Beast" iff'n he's built *thet* way. I've hern tell o' them sea-sogers havin' their "liberty" took away from 'em. Iff'n I war General o' th' ships I never would give them coots any "liberty" a-tall! I'd chain 'em to th' garboard strake an' make 'em walk th' plank. Then I'd keel-haul 'em clear over th' main mast an' TAKE TH' CHAPS TO 'EM. Me! "take THREE craks at his chin"! Say, feller, iff'n I even WINK in yore direction yo'd be smasked t' a grease-spot! Any time yo' fish-hounds on thet tub want a leetle exercise come on over to my house. I ain't no PRIZE-FIGHTER, I fights fer th' FUN o' IT! Thet is, when I ain't too busy, but my woman shore keeps me powerful busy. Let me be a warnin' t' yo'-all, never marry a woman! Not more'n ONCE anyhow.

Junior Schirmer, 106 Rose St., Phillipsburg, N. J., U. S. A. Is 125 years

old, has blonde eyes an' blue hair. He has 5 feet an' is ½ inch tall, weighs 18 lbs. He would like to correspond with some "real" Westerners about his own age. His hobby is rifle shooting matches. He will exchange snaps, hard, soft or medium, and cowboys and cow-gals is his favorite meat.

Now yere's a soft-soap artist as should be encouraged. No wonder she's got a political job. Listen at th' way she does her stuff, I wishet she lived in th' United States, I'd make her Hopeful's Assistant Secretary then apint her Post Master General atter my election.

Big Bar Creek, P. O., B. C., Canada.

Dear Gene: Hi—Gene, will you stop yarning with some of those blonde gals long enough to listen to a brunnette a minute? Thank you! So kindly. What do I want? Why you old darling, I want Pen Pals, of course! Loads of 'em!

I'm a lonely Postmistress who would greatly appreciate hearing from everyone who cares to sling ink in my direction. Now I shall try my durnest to tell you why I am lonely. I live forty-five miles from town in a terribly isolated part of the old universe; a place where only farming is carried on. We receive mail once a week, and dancing is our only source of amusement. Country life is okay for those who like it, but give me the city and I'll be contented.

A brief description of myself: 25 years old, medium complexion, hazel eyes which have a habit of turning green when I am very angry. Reddish brown hair. (Say, wot kint o' reddish does yo' mean? Hoss, winter, er icicle, er jes' red-redish? My woman has been readin' t' me outn a seed catalogue an' I don't know which kint a womins' eyes is most like.) I am not tall, nor am I real short (I 'spects she's sorta medjum) nor am I a heavy-weight (Don't give up, I've hern tell as things grow purty fast up yore way in th' summer-time.)

Those of you who insist on knowing more about my looks just write and I'll tell you the rest. I love music, reading, all outdoor sports — horseback-riding, etc. I do lots of horseback-riding as automobiles are more-or-less of a novelty here — worse luck! — when attending dances I usually have to go aboard a nag. (Fer Cripes Sake! Aintcha got no BUGGIES? No wonder yo' still signs yorese'f "Miss"!) Anyone is welcome to write to me, I'm not barring even a gangster or a minister (By Golly they didn't git s' danged desprut up North Range when I war a younker—Naw SUR!)

Now Gene, if I do not see this in print I will be terribly angry (an' I suppose "green-eyed") and I won't call you "darling" anymore. (Yo' said OLD darling, dang yo'. Yo're soap's got sand in it!) Folks, don't let me think Gene is N. G., fill up the old mail bags for me. (The best way t' git a big mail is t' have quintuplets, that is in Canada).

In closing, I will say your magazine is wonderful and I look forward to each and every copy (So do I, if it makes th' grade I can hope t' live another month.) Adios, Folks, and don't forget to write to:

"BABE."

AGATHA F. MACDONALD.

Th' best danged way t' keep from bein' lonesome is t' larn to sing an' play my songs. Shucks, I wrangled 'em fer THET VERY PURPOSE. Why they be sech a *fine cure,* some folks ruther BE lonesome than t' have t' sing 'em, seems like. Now ALL th' letters is fine letters, only I ain't got time t' spell 'em all out an' has t' jes' run in samples now'n then, sorta promiscuous like. Note th' ear-marks on these yere an' go round 'em up.

Virginia Lewis, 603 *N. Gaffey Place, San Pedro, California,* lives ON A RANCH, a beautiful desert resort. She is 19 and has traveled a heap. Is interested in "JUST EVERYTHING".

K. T. O. de Silva, 15 *Main St., Ambalaugoda, Ceylon.* Cripes, thet's a hole fer yo' golfers an' quaffers t' TEA off fer. Omaris thinks I'm doin' a "good job making friendships between people of all Nations." He is 19 and you'll be surprised wot a slick loop this Main Street cowboy of Ceylon can sling. Betcha don't even know whar at this Main St. is. I'll betcha yo' thought

Ceylon war in yore mother's cupboard or in a grocery-store like I did ontill I seen one o' them funny stamps.

Now yere's a pair o' Michagooses as any ganders should be proud to Pen-up with.

Lottie Wisner and Stella Wismk, both o' 3928 Tillman Ave., Detroit, Michigan, U. S. A. Lottie is 17, she stands 5 ft. 6 in. and weighs 115 lbs. Has dark brown hair, blue-green eyes. Likes dancing, acting, singing. Loves to hear, sing and read western songs and stories. Pines to ride a bronc in "the Wide Open Spaces." She will exchange snapshots and answer all letters.

Stella is 18, has blond hair, is 5 ft. 7 in. and weighs 139. Skating is her favorite passtime, she also likes to go to the movies and collect stories and poems. She crosses her heart she'll answer all Pen Pal letters. Fellers, yere's pair o' Queens fer Openers. I'm thankin' Lottie fer two-bits she sent fer a copy o' "I'm Jes' Waitin' For Th' Morrow" an' I've alretty difided it atween Father Pohlen, the Uncle as has Hopeful's guns in hock, an' th' Paper Company. Like we agreet on in April. Write these gals an' ast 'em how they likes my lament.

Bob "Checkers" Goodell, 803 Linden Ave., Waukegan, Ill. Is 19, has brown hair, blue-gray eyes, is 5 ft. 11 in. and weighs 135. Anxious to exchange friendly, interesting letters. Likes photography, walking, motoring. Hobby is old-time fiddling, also singing, yodling, and playing the guitar. Waits especially to hear from Wisconsin gals. Bob, I don't give a hoot how much yo' yodels, but fer Cripes sake don't let on it's cow-hand musick. No man's a genowine cow-hand onless he respects th' TRADITIONS O' COWCOUNTRY. Yodlin' war *sheep style.* Real cow-hands ain't rustlin' now sheep stuff an' sheps usual mint their own business too. Iff'n we balls-up th' old traditions an' trades wotcha got left? Jes' Plain HASH thet ain't got no more character in' th' ol' Boardin' House stand-by. Them as mixes up trades an' traits all as unconscious as a dough-gawd in a dawg's belly really don't give a damn fer th' foundation their country is built on. A "Yodlin' Cowboy" couldn't no more a got a job on a real cow-ranch or hoss-ranch 'n they could FLY. The fust time they opened their yaps t' yodle it'd a been filled with a boot er a boot-jack an' th' yodler ride over t' th' nighest sheep outfit on a rail. At thet, I've hern tell o' cow-hands as sneaked up on a sheep-wagon an' laid in th' sage t' listen t' a shep yodle. Th' trouble ain't in th' yodlin', it's count th' wars atween cow an' sheep outfits as made it necessary fer hands t' keep on one side th' war or th' other. Thet war ain't over YIT, an' probably never will be escept in big cities an' Hollywood. Th' "Yodlin' Cowboy" as thinks he's helpin' sell suthin' t' ol' cow an' hoss-ranch owners is plumb loco, an' so is his sponsors. Yodle all yo' wanta, but be a Yodlin' Shep, an' then cow an' hoss folks will respect yo'. I suspects th' sheep-ranchers is jes' sot ag'in "Yodlin' *Cowboys"* as is most cow an' hoss outfits. I ain't jawin' yo', I'm TELLIN' YO'!

Some folks claim we don't deliver th' goods. Wa'al we don't aim t'. We jes' figgers t' put yo' wise whar at yo' can git 'em. Seem we don't allus steer wrong:

1422 G. Street, Auburn, Neb.

Dear Editor: One of my friends, Starline Whitmeor, wrote to your Pen Pal page quite a few months ago and she has had such an interesting and enjoyable time receiving and answering the many letters she has gotten, I have decided to try it too.

I expect the description I am going to give of myself is one repeated many

times, but I can't think of any other way to say that: I am a blonde with blue-grey eyes and a fair complexion. And that I would like very much to hear from boys and girls all over the world. I would be glad to exchange photographs. I will be looking for this to be published in your NEXT magazine. With kindest regards, from a hoping Pen Pal.

BETTY SMITH.

Pen Pals ATENSHUN! It's IMPOSSIBILE t' get yore letters in th' "NEXT MAGAZINE" to be on th' news-stands atter yo' write. Thet very magazine is ALRETTY PRINTED, iff'n it wasn't YOU WOULDN'T GIT IT when yo' wants it. Like I done said on th' start, this is March 15, but th' magazine this is used in will be th' June 15 issue, out about May 15. Folks, it's SOME JOB t' git th' stuff t' make a magazine "set-up" all selected an' set-up an' printed an' distributed. A story named "TH' TRAIL O' A PUBLISHED STORY" would make mighty interestin' readin' fer most READERS. Yo'd be SURPRISED! Th' adwenture sech a story has is equal t' any HERO'S as ever did business at th' ol' stand. Why! it's hair-breadth's escapes from death start even afore it's half borned in a writer's head. An' from thet second it's life is JES' ONE DAMN THING ATTER ANOTHER. Thousands die fer every one as "lives" in th' pages o' a magazine or book. Some is pened-up fer YEARS afore they ever sees th' light o' a reader's smilin' face. Every story or article even a professional writer writes is An ADVENTURE, th' writer is an' adventuror and GAMBLER. Some times I thinks thet iff'n yo' could read th' story back o' a story yo' does read, yo' git a bigger thrill than in th' printed pages. Yeah, iff'n I war a top-hand wort-wrangler I'd write a BOOK an' it would be "Th' Story of A Story", 'cause I happens t' know some sech as would make mighty interestin' readin'. Mebbe I'll tackle th' job, some day anyhow.

DEAD OR ALIVE
NOTICE
REWARD OFFERED

"Dynamite Don" Cormie and Buck Bowen of Sub. P. O. 23, Alberta, Canada, is anxious to get in touch with cowboys and cowgals as will jine a posse with 'em and run down a gang o' outlaws. Both is well equipped fer desprut battle an' will send pitchers showin' them an' their hosses an' rigs t' other cowboys and gals as will sign on with 'em in a trail t' th' death. No quitters wanted. Apply by mail or in person imegiately or sooner. Above address.

11, Cato Street, Durban, Natal,
South Africa.

Dear Coteau: First I wish to let you know that your magazine is very difficult to get. I do a good amount of traveling and am afraid I may have the misfortune to miss an issue. If you team me up with another Pen Pal please send me address and I will gladly pay the postage.

I would like for you to find me a cowboy who knows something about the Golden West of to-day and in return I will do my best to describe this country and will exchange snaps. My teammate must range from 18 to 22, looks do not count with me so long as he is clean-minded.

I am very lonely, a deep thinker, happy, and a good sport where boys are concerned. I love all outdoor sports and especially if I can work into any monkey business. Height 5 ft. 5 in., weight 127 lbs.; grey eyes; age 19; light brown hair.

I am a bit of a "tomboy" as you can see. I go in for boxing, wrestling, hiking, swimming, and am always meddling with my brothers' bikes. I am also a bit of a nurse. I have passed the exams. I think I have a clean record as my two elder brothers are always with me.

I faithfully promise to answer all letters, but please don't forget to let me know by letter whom you have chosen as my team-mate. Wishing you

ALL great success and happiness, I remain,

Yours faithfully,
(MISS) ROSA CAROLINE FLETCHER.

P.S. Dad is an American, and don't I wish we could come to America. A letter from the GOOD OLD U.S.A. is next best.

I'm not matchin' up any teams this time o' year. It's too late t' git 'em busted in good fer spring work. But I'll be a watchin' yo' ALL p'form an' later on I'll know better how t' match yo' up, color, size, age, weight, gait an' disposition. When any o' yo' esperinces any trouble gittin' this magazine, Write direct t' "Circulation Manager" an' tell HIM yore troubles. Iff'n he don't help yo' best he can, then leave Me know an' I shoot him.

1427 Biren Street,
Iron Mountain, Mich.

Dear Gene: I have just started on my first issue of W. W. S. and C. N. M. and think it is a great magazine. I sure did get a lot of enjoyment out of it. That story named Utah sure was plenty good. I would like to see, more stories by Gladwell Richardson. He sure does know the West.

I would like to have lots of boys and girls about my age write to me. I will answer all letters. I am 19 years old, weigh 190 lbs. and am over 6 feet tall.

Yours sincerely,
Bob Stanchins.

I'll talk to Glad an' see iff'n I can't twist another yarn outa him, but livin' out'n Arizona, about 15 miles from No-place, like Glad does, I can't see why yo' should imagine he knows anythin' about th' West. Say, I larnt more queer things about th' West on a trip I once made back t' New York 'n I'd ever heard of afore. An' now Frank Robinson has made *his fust* trip thar, an' he war all bewildered when he stopped off t' see me. Claims he ain't none shore *a tall* whar he war borned, or *has been* all his life. He made a lotta notes about th' West when he war down East, so *now* he can write West stuff like "IT OUGHT TO BE." Only him an' me has got a better scheme, we're gonna write stories about New York City. I war thar 3 *days,* about 15 year ago, an' now he's been thar 10 *days,* so *atween* us we can write yarns 'bout th' Wolves o' Wall street, an' Broadway afternoons. I knows ONE thing 'bout New York City as don't seem like New Yorkers knows. It *really* is one o' th' Island Providences o' th' United States. They got it wrong, they claim "th' United States is a Providence o' New York City," and talks about ever'thin' out side o' New York City as bein' "Provincial". So I writ th' Historical Department, Washington, D. C. an' got th' low down on th' matter. They says as New York City is a "providence Island possession o' th' United States" jes' like Guam or th' Virgin Islands, only o' course New York City ain't no virgin. I suggest a New Treaty atween New York City an' Th' United States be made so they won't has to move Wall Street to Jersey City. Now me, fer one, I'd be willin' t' compromise, some, fer a *cash consideration.* Thet'd save a *lotta trouble* over passports to th' United States 'n Back.

1600 Germantown Street,
Dayton, Ohio.

Howdy Old Timer: Give an old reader of W. W. S. and C. N. M. a ride on the outlaw in the Round-up Corral. Oh yeah, I've been reading the magazine for too many years not to know what I mean by that. The outfit of authors corraled by the magazine are O.K., exceptionally good. Any chance for a rough riding outlaw joining the rodeo? One who'll guarantee to ride any horse except Jackie Young. Oh yes, I've been reading *his outbreaks* in the January issue and don't agree with him and, for that matter, *with you either.*

By the way, Gene, may I use your Round-up in order to rustle a few pen pals? I believe I may, so here goes:

I am 30 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall, medium complexion with a black thatch and dark brown eyes. Born in

Las Vegas, Nev., and am at present in the theatrical profession. I'd like to have the so-called "weaker sex" drop me a line, and I will warrant a prompt reply. That's fair enough. Here's hoping this doesn't hit the waste paper basket. I sincerely remain, a W. W. S. and C. N. M. fan,

Jack Bearse.

So yo' don't agree with Jack Young an' me—huh? Wot about, an' jes' whar does y' p'fer t' be shot an' planted? Yo' shore ain't got much sabe jumpin' onta Jack Young. Don'tcha know he's got th' wust rep as a KILLER in Milwaukee? Man, th' TIME THET COOT can kill is *awful!* I wouldn't have nawthin' t' do with him iffn I wan't s' scurt o' him. Ride ME all yo' wanta, I'm hiret fer *thet pupose,* but Jack's still free, an' anyhow *part* white. Yeah, yo' better agree with Jack Young whether yo' agree with him er not, I do!

S. O. S.
Post Office Box 621 Drumheller,
Alberta, Canada.

Dear "Coteau Gene": I have been a steady reader of your magazine for over five years. I enjoy the interesting stories in it and must say that Gladwell Richardson, Charles H. Snow, Frank C. Robertson, Ralph Page, and Ed Earl Repp write good stories. Would my petition for Pen Pals find its way into the Round-up?

I am a man over 35 years of age and am very lonesome. I would like to hear from girls from 20 to 35 years of age.

Yours truly,
V. L. C.

Durn it! Any coot as will read this magazine fer FIVE YEARS afore he writes me oughta be outlawed. Think I'm gonna go rustle a gal fer a slow-poke like yo'? Wa'al, JES' THIS ONCET, I will, but don'tcha leave no five years' growth o' grass grow onder yore hoofs ag'in iff I does loop yo' a gal. No wonder yo're lonesome! Shucks! Iffn yo'd a got a move on yo' five years ago yo' mighta had a round-up outfit o' *yore own* by this time.

Gals! Git busy an' smoke this cuss out. I'm bettin' he's a likely critter, judgin' from his hand writin', iffn yo' can git nigh enough t' him t' git a loop on him. I'll say this, these shy ones often make th' best harness stock. Take me fer instance.

Benarkin, Via Brisbane,
Queensland, Australia.

Dear Gene I have just started reading your magazine. The stories are hair-raising, but they stir you up until you have finished them. I would like to know if you could get me some Pen Pals of either sex. I am 5 ft. 6 in.; weight about 126 lbs. Have fair hair, it is wavy, and blue eyes.

I am 21 years old and enjoy cowboy riding very much. I love dancing. I have a horse, its name is Fortune. I will exchange snap-shots with boys and girls between 19 and 21 years of age.

Yours truly,
(Miss) Eva Gatfield.

Now yere's a cut o' ———! ! ! ******* ???? !!!

Consarn IT! I bulged squar inta th' drift fence an' never seen it A-TALL ontil I had m' off hint laig hooked over a bob-wire. Dang nigh pult m' boot off gittin' loose. This means I'm at th' end o' my picket rope an' it's time t' bed-down. At thet I ain't worked half th' stock in th' Round-up. But I'll has t' holt 'em over ontil I can git some more cattle cars t' ship 'em in.

O.K. fellers, It's grub-pile an' th' hay. But don't wander off very fur. I'll take this cut inta town t' marra an' arrange fer a string o' crates fer next month. Th' market's lookin' up quite fairish, but a lot more moisture would be a blessin' t' cow-country. Don't fergit I'm candydate fer Presidunt an' be a thinkin' over all th' things yo' want me 'n Santa Clauss t' bring yo' an' iff'n yo' don't git everything yo' wants blame it onta HIM, not me.

Your'n
"Coteau Gene", Th' Foreman.

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29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.95	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.45
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
6.00-16	3.75	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.45
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15

All Other Sizes

Balloon Tires

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
31x6.00-19	$3.40	$1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
31x6.50-19	3.70	1.35
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

Heavy Duty Trucks

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$ 2.35	$ .75
30x5	4.25	1.95
34x5	4.25	1.95
32x6	7.95	2.75
36x6	9.95	3.95
34x7	10.95	3.95
36x8	12.45	4.25
40x8	15.95	4.95

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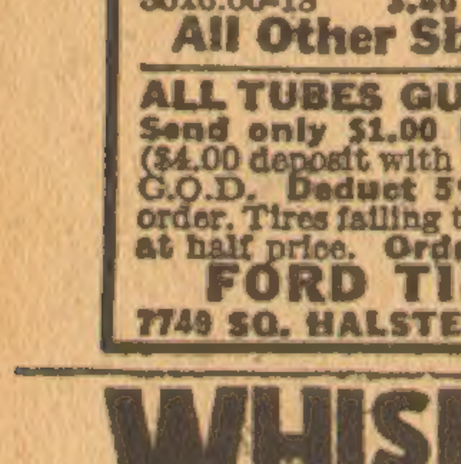

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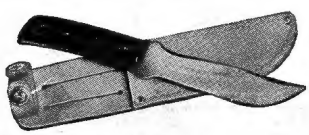

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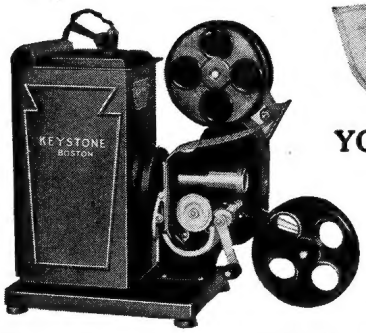

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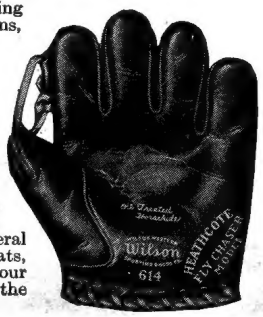

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